

Dialectics of protest

Political mobilisation in the Egyptian countryside

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Abstract

Political mobilisation in rural Egypt is a phenomenon that is mediated by power relations. Since the end of the 1980s the Egyptian agricultural sector has experienced a major transformation as the decaying state infrastructure of rural institutions were gradually replaced by the market. Both international financial institutions and the government promoted the market reforms in the agricultural sector. In Egypt the reforms were implemented in the agricultural sector in ways that converged with the class interests of the dominant rural bourgeoisie. Small farmers, tenants, and rural poor experienced the reforms as increased hardship and increasing insecurity.

The rural bourgeoisie had in turn become the key constituency of the state in the rural areas in a process of “retraditionalisation” from the 1960s onwards. The result was that the networks between the state and this class dominated the state’s rural institutions. These networks that stretched between the state apparatus and the rural bourgeoisie bridged social, economic, and political categories of power. Similar developments in the fishing sector illustrate the extent of the domination.

The land reforms in turn gave rise to protests among dispossessed rural inhabitants whose livelihoods were threatened. The relationship between political mobilisation and hegemony is an intricate relationship of power and counter-power. The form and content of rural protests has been structured by a dialectical relationship with the networks of power. Protests in the countryside emerged as a reaction – an antithesis – to the land reforms. After the 25th of January uprising, these protests became organised in trade unions. However, some of these trade unions did not emerge from the practice of protest, rather they were attempts to control and direct the rural political mobilisation, which can be understood as a synthesis of dialectics of protest.

The attempts to control the political mobilisation in the countryside coincided with the two dominant political forces that competed for control of the state at the time. The voting patterns in the 2012 presidential election reveal the different geographical and social location of the political forces’ networks of support. The importance of directing the rural mobilisation efforts for the purposes of the political forces at the centre is thus revealed.

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Thanks to my family, for the patience. Soon I'll have enough university education to go around for everyone.

And last I need to thank روزهان: You are my eternal daylight.

The errors and oversights herein are my responsibility.

A note on transliteration

I have followed the standard of transliteration used in the Hans Wehr's Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic. All material from Arabic sources, including names and places are transliterated according to this model. So are specialised Arabic terms. I have, for the sake of expediency and readability made one (consistent) omission, which is to leave out the definite article (*al-*) in front of transliterated place names where it features in Arabic. I have made an exception for all names of people and places that have an accepted English spelling, for example Gamal Abdel Nasser or Cairo. There is an exception to the exception; I do transliterate these names however, if I refer to them as an Arabic source.

I have generally sought to avoid specialised Arabic vocabulary. Writing about agriculture, the term *faddān*, pl. *fadādīn*, or spelled *feddan*, pl. *feddans*, sometimes appear in English texts. I have chosen to use the English word acre, as that word denominates approximately the same area. 1 *faddān* = 0,42 hectare (=1.038 American acre) = 24 qarārīt (sing. qīrāt).

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Introduction: Political mobilisation in the countryside

Political mobilisation in rural Egypt is a complex phenomenon. Originally my interest was peaked by the 25th of January uprising, which spread to and included the rural areas of Egypt. Lila Abu-Lughod has written on how the revolution was “lived” in a village in Upper Egypt. Abu-Lughod describes how villagers who had experienced the heavy hand of the police state were able to organise themselves and mobilise against the “regime”.¹ In the Delta, Mukhtar Saad Shehata and Samuli Schielke documented how the revolution manifested in a small Delta village called “the Secret Capital”.² There the “village revolutionaries” organised sit-ins, a clean-up campaign in the village, and demonstration marches. Taken together, Abu-Lughod, and Shehata and Schielke suggest the uprising politicised the rural population.

The notion of politicisation, however, is built on an implicit assumption that the countryside was not politicised before the uprising. Mona El-Ghobashy has suggested that “the revolution” was the result of the demonstrators who successfully defeated the state’s security apparatus in Cairo.³ She continues that these demonstrators used knowledge they had gained after a decade of protests preceding demonstrations on the 25th of January.⁴ Different social forces, for example workers, political opposition organisations, football ultras, and Islamist movements contributed to the success of the urban uprising. Similarly, in the countryside, behind the demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins were people making “the revolution” as they went along. And on the 11th of February 2011, these forces overthrew Hosni Mubarak.

The initial personal motivation for carrying out this study was the uprising in Taḥrīr and a curiosity about its impact on Egyptian society and politics. The thesis is based on information I collected during two and a half months of fieldwork in Egypt in the fall of 2012, as well as extensive use of documents, reports, and academic books and papers on the Egyptian countryside. I analyse different forms of political mobilisation in the Egyptian countryside. Initially I intended to analyse the political protests of farmers and fishermen after the uprising. As the project unfolded, I saw the advantages of including farmers and fishermen in a broader analysis of rural political mobilisation. The rural population accounts

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Living the “revolution” in an Egyptian village: Moral action in a national space,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 1 (2012).

² Mukhtar Shehata and Samuli Schielke, Documentary Film, “The Secret Capital,” (2013).

³ Mona El-Ghobashy, “The praxis of the Egyptian revolution,” *Middle East Report*, no. 258 (2011).

⁴ Ibid.

for a significant portion of Egyptians; almost 55 percent live in rural areas or small towns, while agriculture employs 29 percent of the labour force.⁵ A significant portion of the rural population does not work in agriculture, which is exacerbated by the many farmers who rely on additional income for their sustenance.⁶ Thus by broadening the perspective I am able to analyse the impact of the uprising on the political and social initiatives in the countryside. Through Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, I analyse how economic, social, and political power converge, and how the resulting networks go beyond the imagined spaces of "state" and "market". Taking this argument further, I show how these networks are key in understanding the political mobilisation in the countryside. I argue that the farmers' protests are shaped in a dialectical relationship with these networks between the state and its rural institutions and the rural bourgeoisie.

Some of the previous contributions on this subject build on a theoretical claim that politics in the countryside are based on "the moral economy" of the rural population. Nathan Brown's, and partly Sayyid 'Aṣmāwī's, books are in this tradition.⁷ The proponents of "the moral economy" theory build their claims on an assumption that farmers ("peasants") are autonomous subjects able to determine their acts independently of power relations.⁸ Timothy Mitchell shows how this assumption leads to a series of paradoxes within the writings of "the moral economy" school and suggests an alternative understanding using Gramsci's notion of hegemony.⁹ Looking closer at the concept of hegemony, Perry Anderson has shown how Gramsci's use of it renders the concept contradictory.¹⁰ Drawing on Mitchell, I argue that it can nevertheless be used to understand the condition of domination that follow from the emergence of modern institutions and their ability to regulate political and social practices.

⁵ CIA Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Egypt," (2014).

⁶ Robert Springborg, "Rolling Back Egypt's Agrarian Reform," *Middle East Report*, no. 166 (1990); Robert Springborg, "Agrarian Bourgeoisie, Semiproletarians, and the Egyptian State: Lessons for Liberalization," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 04 (1990).

⁷ Sayyid 'Aṣmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-l-Sulṭa: 'Alā Daw' al-Ḥarakāt al-Fallāḥīya al-Miṣrīya (1919-1999)*, 1. ed. (Cairo: Mīrīt, 2001); Nathan J. Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Nathan J. Brown, "The Conspiracy of Silence and the Atomistic Political Activity of the Egyptian Peasantry, 1882-1952," in *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (Armonk, N.Y. : M.E. Sharpe, 1989).

⁸ Forrest D. Colburn, *Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1989); James C. Scott, *Decoding subaltern politics : ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics*, Asia's transformations (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance : hidden transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak : everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry," *Politics & Society* 7, no. 3 (1977); James C. Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant : rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); James C. Scott and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Special Issue on Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13, no. 2 (1986).

⁹ Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power," *Theory and society* 19, no. 5 (1990).

¹⁰ Perry Anderson, "The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review*, no. 100 (1977).

In the Egyptian countryside, social change has since the mid 1980s taken the form of market reforms included in a narrative of development. According to my informants, during the course of these market reforms the benefits and support that farmers and fishermen enjoyed have been removed. Simultaneously, the social security of the rural population in general has eroded. Critical accounts however reveal the networks of power behind the concrete implementation of market reforms. Through the example of the market for fertiliser, I argue that market reforms have not removed “the state” from “the market”. Instead they have enabled afforded networks to use their influence within “the state” or “the market” to gain advantages and economic benefits from the possibilities that the market reforms offer. This is replicated all the way down to village level where nexuses of social, economic, and political power dominate. With that in mind, I argue that the market should also be considered an institution because it structures the behaviour of people. The force of the market is evident in the farmers and fishermen’s articulation of “the silent compulsion of economic relations”.¹¹

Next I trace the historical trajectories of these nexuses of power and the historical development of the relation with the expanding state apparatus since the 1960s. I argue that throughout the ensuing decades, the state apparatus came to rely on the rural bourgeoisie to project power. In turn, the continuing recruitment of members from the rural bourgeoisie into the state institutions opened the state apparatus for the influence of class interests of the rural bourgeoisie. It was through these relations between the state institutions and the rural upper class that produced the nexuses of power that came to dominate the countryside. It is important to note that this process occurred over a long time, and it was not straightforward but riddled with contradictions and factional struggles. However, over this time, the agricultural and rural policies have gradually come to reflect the class interests of the rural bourgeoisie.

Looking at the fishing sector, I find the same pattern. The political economy of the sector has been changed under a narrative of development to conform to the economic class interests of the rural bourgeoisie. Concretely this manifests as the promotion and expansion of an aquaculture sector which threatens the livelihoods of the artisanal fishermen in the northern Delta lakes. Lastly, I turn to the forms of political mobilisation that emerge in the networks of power of social forces and the state apparatus. Political mobilisation is here

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1976). p. 899.

understood to be various ways in which people organise to influence political decisions that affect their lives. This can be both within and outside established political procedures.

Outside the established procedures I examine the protests that emerged with the implementation of law 96 of 1992. This law caused social instability in many parts of the countryside since it became a tool for landowning interests to reclaim land lost during Nasser land reform laws.¹² These protests emerged as responses to localised efforts to dispossess tenant farmers or land law beneficiaries of land. The protests did give rise to a few non-governmental organisations that established rural networks. After the January 2011 uprising, many of these conflicts intensified or re-emerged. However, a novelty in the countryside was the rapid dissemination of the trade unions and syndicates. Although most of these were local efforts, four emerged on the national level with the aim of mobilising farmers and defending farmers' interests. All four national syndicates were tied to different networks that had been established prior to the uprising, some of which had negative consequences for the politicising potential of the syndicates. There were also local trade unions that represented a genuine politicisation at the local level, but where politicisation came at the cost of mobilisation.

I proceed to analyse rural mobilisation in the countryside, through a discussion of turnout patterns and voter preferences in the first and second rounds of the 2012 presidential election. Using the statistical database of the Presidential Elections Commission, I compare differences in turnout statistics and preferences. The voting patterns suggest the geographical and social composition of some important rural constituencies of different ideological and political currents. However, based on an analysis of the policies of the victorious candidate, Muḥammad Mursī, compared to some of the literature on elections in Egypt, I also suggest that although the elections may be competitive, the shape of the mobilisation effort in the countryside originated and relied on the networks of power that I referred to above.

Thus I conclude that although political mobilisation in the countryside happens, these efforts have not yet been successful in establishing a counter-hegemonic rural-based presence. Political mobilisation efforts with counter-hegemonic potential either remain local

¹² Ray Bush, *Counter-revolution in Egypt's countryside: land and farmers in the era of economic reform* (London: Zed Books, 2002); in particular Ray Bush, "More losers than winners in Egypt's countryside: the impact of changes in land tenure," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and Farmers in the Era of Economic Reform*. (London: Zed Books, 2002); Ray Bush, "Land Reform and Counter-Revolution," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside*, ed. Ray Bush (London: Zed Books, 2002); Land Centre for Human Rights, "Farmer Struggles against Law 96 of 1992," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and Farmers in the Era of Economic Reform*, ed. Ray Bush (London: Zed Books, 2002); Reem Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and Farmers in the Era of Economic Reform*, ed. Ray Bush (London: Zed Books, 2002).

or, if they expand, they risk being co-opted into the existing power structure and hence become another hegemonic institution.

In the first chapter, I discuss previous literature on rural politics in Egypt, and this literature's shortcomings. I then discuss Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the problems associated with this theory, including its application in the context of modern Egypt, and suggest a possible solution, before I proceed to account for my fieldwork in Egypt. In the second chapter I analyse the social foundation of the market reforms to show how "the market" and "the state" are social institutions. Underlying the practices implemented under the aegis of market reform, are influential networks of interest. I move on in chapter three to describe the historical development of the interested networks focusing on the expansion of modern state institutions and practices into the countryside and the ensuing interaction with the dominant classes. I then show how the same underlying mechanisms are evident in the fishing sector. In the fourth chapter, I continue a different plot from chapter two, and analyse how rural protests are linked to the market reforms, and how they are continuously structured by the power networks that extend between the centre of the state apparatus to the countryside. Finally, in chapter five, I look at electoral mobilisation through voting patterns in the countryside, arguing that they can suggest the social and geographical location of the networks on which different political forces in the centre rely. The conclusion follows at the end of the fifth chapter.

1 “Come on, ask him!” Fields of literature and fields of work

I conducted most of my interviews with farmers and fishermen in a small village in the Delta governorate of Kafr al-Šayk. At one point I found myself along with a friend, searching in the fields outside the village for a contact that had promised to set up a meeting with some other farmers for me. I was thinking about the questions, answers and follow-ups. As we were searching the field for my contact, he saw me from the other side, and shouted “Come on, ask him!” “Him” was another farmer nearby that we had just passed. I had not anticipated having to interrupt a stranger in his work to carry out my interview; I was expecting to be introduced. The surprise threw me off and left me feeling out of control over the selection of informants. As it turned out, all of the farmers I interviewed in the field that day were very helpful. However, standing there in the field I felt quite helpless at the time. Least of all I failed to situate myself within the long line of writers on rural Egypt who had preceded me – if not in that village then in countless others. These writers and researchers had already framed many of the questions, though not always helpfully. Their writings had also framed my thinking, however, and I need to reflect on that impact.

Significant previous writings on the politics of the Egyptian countryside are within a tradition labelled “peasant studies.” Timothy Mitchell shows that although these writings have addressed different elements within the countryside to explain its politics, from institutions and state policies to local culture, they often suffer from the same blind spot.¹³ He criticises the literature for continuously failing to grasp the extent to which violence and power is directed towards the poor. Thereby, the symptoms of this violence are misinterpreted or silenced.¹⁴ Mitchell traces the problem to two origins. One was how, within modern social science, “development” has been understood as an outside force, which interferes with and changes the independent space of a village. With development thus conceptualised, it feeds into and draws on the development industry. Authors who then move

¹³ Timothy Mitchell, “Fixing the economy,” *Cultural studies* 12, no. 1 (1998); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). see esp. pp. 145-6, 164, 178, 268-9

¹⁴ Mitchell, “Everyday metaphors of power.”; Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 166-7.

back and forth between the two spheres are, according to Mitchell, loath to criticise or go beyond the limited understanding of development.¹⁵

A related source lies in the very definition of the term peasant. Development as a concept of change is founded upon a notion of modernity as distinct from history and tradition. That is, development only makes sense if there is a difference between what is and what was. The category of “peasants” was from the very beginning defined as an uneasy mix between these two ideal spheres. “Peasant studies” became a distinct field in the late sixties and early seventies, drawing on several precursors within anthropology, area studies and travel literature. The *Journal of Peasant Studies*, for example, was founded in 1973. Yet the earliest attempt to define “the third world-peasant” occurred in 1966 in Eric Wolf’s *Peasants*. There he defines the category of “the peasant” as “rural cultivators” distinguishable from “primitives” on the one hand and farmers on the other.¹⁶ Wolf saw “peasants” at an intermediary stage, or “mode of production”, between pre-modern cultivators and modern, capitalistic farmers.¹⁷ Thus the theoretical position of the “peasants” was partly on the outside of the global division of labour. Within such a framework, “peasants” were construed as an object in need of (further) modernisation. However, as long as they remained “peasants” they could never *be* modern. As such, the definition lent itself to the politicised development aid during the Cold War.

The connotation of the word “peasant” is also present in Egypt, where the Arabic word *fallāḥ* often implies ideas of backwardness, simplicity, and tradition. Only rarely did I hear the word used positively, and then as a self-description by informants who claimed authenticity and familiarity with the *fallāḥūn*, though without necessarily working the land. Many more farmers rejected it, some preferring *muzāri ‘ūn*, which means cultivators. Given the problematic history and local connotations of the term “peasant”, for the purposes of this text I choose to use the term “farmer”, by which I mean to denote those who cultivate land that they either own or rent – regardless of that holdings size. I separate farmers from agricultural workers, who cultivate land but have no holdings, and landowners, who own but do not cultivate.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*.

¹⁶ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasants*, Foundations of modern anthropology series (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,: Prentice-Hall, 1966). p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-3.

1.1 “Peasants” and literature

Returning to the literature on the Egyptian countryside, there are a few contributions that avoid the problem discussed above. There is Timothy Mitchell’s work on the Egyptian countryside, along with Ray Bush, Sayyid ‘Āshmāwī’s *Al-fallāḥūn wa-l-ṣūlṭa: ‘Alā ḍaw‘ al-ḥarakāt al-fallāḥīya al-Miṣrīya*, and Nathan Brown’s *Peasant politics in modern Egypt: the struggle against the state*.¹⁸ In addition, there are numerous other contributions in anthologies and journals. However, in the following I focus on the above listed contributions as they form the foundation of and inform the theoretical considerations of this text.

Timothy Mitchell’s writings on the Egyptian countryside are a central point of departure for this text.¹⁹ A central concern for Mitchell is to expose the modern forms of power that enable certain policies and forms of intervention in the countryside. In several careful readings of previous texts on the Egyptian countryside, he excavates the assumptions, prejudices and silences that in his opinion have “framed” the Egyptian countryside as a testing ground for neoliberal policies. He accomplishes this by illustrating how economics creates an object called the economy – or capitalism – through assuming it has an inner logic. Going beyond that, he shows how that this assumption cannot correspond to the lived practices of ordinary people. On a broader level Mitchell questions what he calls the “techno-politics” of the modern world: the practice of creating the world as a representation and with it the expertise to interpret these representations.²⁰

In *Rule of Experts* Mitchell criticises many of the metanarratives of development and change, in particular that of capitalism as modernity. Though I agree with many of his points, this book retains a metanarrative of its own, that of modernity. Thus his gesture is not one of removal, but replacement. Instead of describing modernity in neoliberal terms as the expansion of the market, or in Marxist terms, as that of capitalism, he relies on a third category: techno-politics. Techno-politics becomes a mode of power that defines all other modes in Mitchell’s account. The critical question is why specifically this power arises and takes its particular form. This theoretical problem does not take anything away from Mitchell’s account of the politics of rural Egypt, where he describes how violence directed at

¹⁸ ‘Āshmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*; Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*; Bush, *Counter-revolution in Egypt's countryside*; Ray Bush, *Economic crisis and the politics of reform in Egypt* (Westview Press Boulder, CO, 1999); Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*. A collection of earlier articles on Egypt; see also Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

²⁰ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 14-5.

the poor has been an integral, but hidden part of the political projects, and how it has shaped the responses by farmers and rural dwellers. The strength of Mitchell's account is that he also avoids the contradiction that often occurs in explanation for political quiescence or political mobilisation in rural Egypt.

Ray Bush's work centres the causes and effects of one recent political project, namely the neoliberal reforms that the government of Egypt undertook in the agricultural sector from the late 1980s onwards.²¹ Many of Bush's texts concern the ways in which these reforms, despite their apparent success, have adversely affected the most vulnerable of the rural community. On the other hand Bush does not systematically treat the responses of the rural dwellers, and to the extent that he does, he seems to underestimate their ability to organise collectively.

In a text written after the 25th of January uprising, Bush takes his criticism further, and seeks to theorise it under the heading of "abjection" defined as the "'active dispossession' of people."²² Abjection is an alternative to marginalisation. It seeks to define poverty as absence of access to, or distance from, an economic and political centre. The theory of marginalisation re-presents the causes of poverty in accordance with the liberal tradition. Poverty, according to the theory of marginalisation, is caused not by capitalism and the market, but failure to be properly and fully included into the market economy.²³ Bush's alternative theory of abjection hypothesises that the market in fact causes marginalisation, and that people, through their inclusion into the market can be dispossessed, both economically and politically. However, the theories abjection and marginalisation share a common assumption about the essential political disenfranchisement of the poor and their inability to have voices.

There are a few works that present contrasting views, for example Sayyid 'Ašmāwī and Nathan Brown. In *Al-fallāḥūn wa-l-šulṭa*, 'Ašmāwī provides a history of peasant political activity where he traces it from the early parts of the twentieth century until and including the land disputes that followed reform legislation in the nineties.²⁴ And while 'Ašmāwī traces peasant political activity throughout the century, the advantage of his account – and the

²¹ See in particular Bush, *Counter-revolution in Egypt's countryside*; Bush, *Economic crisis and the politics of reform in Egypt*, as well as numerous articles quoted throughout this thesis.

²² Ray Bush, "Marginality or abjection? The political economy of poverty production in Egypt," in *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt*, ed. Ray Bush and Habib Ayeub (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), p. 55.

²³ See Asef Bayat, "Marginality: cure or curse?," in *Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt*, ed. Ray Bush and Habib Ayeub (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

²⁴ 'Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*.

drawback – is the inclusion of an account of the crucial Nasser era for reshaping the relationship between state and the agricultural sector and rural Egypt at large. The drawback is that this account is too limited, and that the extent of the changing relationship is not sufficiently accounted for. He does, however, answer the question on political activity among farmers in the affirmative.

Nathan Brown's *Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt* is very similar, but only draws on the period before 1952.²⁵ Yet his argument can be generalised, thus I will render it in a simplified form. Briefly stated, Nathan Brown claims that farmers undertake political actions in many forms, from rebellions to petitions and protests to some of which is covert or even criminal in nature like theft or sabotage. This interpretation is based on the assumption that "[p]easant politics is not passivity punctuated by rebellion but rather a continuous struggle against a wide variety of adversaries."²⁶ Brown aims his criticism at both the traditional image of the passive peasant, and the Marxist stereotype of the proto-revolutionary peasant. In so doing he draws on the "everyday resistance" school associated particularly with the work of James C. Scott.²⁷ This theoretical position has been criticised for a number of problems relating to its conceptualisation of peasants and its intellectual heritage; some of which I recount below.

The strength of Brown's, and Scott's position is that it enables them to describe activities as political that are not usually conceived of in that manner. In addition to rebellions, petitions, and protests, covert and individual actions like murder, larceny, and arson are political action according to Brown. "Peasants" could do this because they were protected by the refusal of their compatriots to cooperate with the authorities – a "conspiracy of silence" as Henry Ayrout, author of *the Egyptian Peasant*, calls it.²⁸ According to Brown, the collective silence illustrated the communal approval of the (criminal) acts, which in turn illustrates shared cultural values between the peasants, including particular norms for right and wrong: a "moral economy".²⁹ The "moral economy of the peasants" thus also provides the motivations of "the peasants"; it explains why peasants acted in these ways. Brown

²⁵ Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 214.

²⁷ Scott, *Decoding subaltern politics : ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics*; Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance : hidden transcripts*; Scott and Kerkvliet, "Special Issue on Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-East Asia."; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant : rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*.

²⁸ Henry Habib Ayrout, *The Egyptian peasant* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

²⁹ Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*: pp. 98-105; here, Brown is referring to Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant : rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*.

claims that “peasants” “[see] politics in concrete, local and personal terms.”³⁰ And, following this view, if “peasants” sense of right is transgressed, they respond by avoiding authorities and taking matters into their own hands.

Nathan Brown thus answers the question about rural political activity positively. By widening the definition of politics to also account for actions that neither government nor rural notables and large landowner sanctioned, he is able to construct a separate sphere in which peasants engage politically. Yet it is this sphere of the “moral economy” that makes Brown’s – and Scott’s – claims problematic. The “moral economy” creates a basic dichotomy between the two forms of politics; the subversive acts of everyday resistance on the one hand and the formally organised on the other. And although Brown begins with the assertion that the political activity of farmers is a continuum, by the end, he concludes:

rebellion, voting, and petitioning reveal less about peasants themselves than about the prevailing relations of power [...] Peasants merely followed the leads of notables or large landowners when engaged in these activities. Atomistic and communal action were therefore far more revealing of peasant values and attitudes.³¹

Here Brown distinguishes between the different forms of political action. He writes that the local group (“communal”) and individual (“atomistic”) acts are to “reveal more” about values and attitudes, as if he claims it to be a truer form of peasant politics. By presenting this distinction, Brown also re-presents “peasants” as autonomous political agents. This, however, creates a paradox in the text.

Timothy Mitchell criticises the concept of the “moral economy”. According to Mitchell, the “moral economy” which allows Scott (and Brown) to present “the peasants” as political actors, also endows them with an autonomous political consciousness. Such an approach creates several paradoxes in the text.³² According to Scott, the “moral economy of the peasants” enables “peasants” to demystify the ruling ideologies because they have values and culture formed autonomously from that of their superiors. It is these values and that culture that “peasants” draw upon in the numerous daily acts of subversive resistance as well as in rebellions, and help them, says Scott, to see through the ideologies that legitimate the ruling hierarchies of which they are at the bottom. Thus rather than being “subalterns” – subjects whose voices are not heard³³ – Scott is able to present “the peasants” as historical

³⁰ Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*: p. 221.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 214-5.

³² Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power."; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; see also Scott, *Decoding subaltern politics : ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics*; Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance : hidden transcripts*; Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry."; Scott, *The moral economy of the peasant : rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*.

³³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

agents capable of conscious and autonomous political action.³⁴ Mitchell then arrives at the resulting paradox in Scott's text: because Scott's "peasants" are able to demystify the ideological dominance, the choices they make faced with clear economic and political domination becomes accordingly rational. And hence Scott needs to claim that "peasants" choose the quiet subversive everyday resistance rather than large-scale revolt as they often lead to undesirable results.³⁵

The same paradox appears in Brown's text: if "peasants" are able to discern the ideological components of domination, why are they happy to go along with the rural bourgeoisie for political purposes that are not their own? And if to them politics are "concrete, local and personal", why do they engage in "national" causes? To generalise the particularity of this question into a general one; how do subalterns act politically, and why do they choose some strategies over others? This is a problem at the level of epistemology, insofar as subalterns are defined as those whose voice are not heard. That is, it is impossible to answer this question because as soon as a subaltern voice is heard, that particular voice seizes to be a subaltern. This relation, between "peasant studies" and the wider historiographical problem of subalternity appears also in Scott's latest book, *Decoding Subaltern Politics*.³⁶

1.2 Hegemony and resistance

The field of "peasant studies" rose to prominence during the political economy of the Cold War at a time when competing regimes in "the North" made space for newly independent regimes from "the South". Understanding the recurrence of rural revolts and insurgencies – Vietnam, Malaysia, Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua – became an aspect of the politics at the time. And with the newfound political independence came claims of historical independence, to challenge the dominant "Western" historiography. James C. Scott's work is one such attempt; a second is the Indian Subaltern Studies projects associated with Ranajit Guha and others.³⁷ Both attempts, despite their different political outsets, largely end up confronting the

³⁴ See Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power," pp. 549-56.

³⁵ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*: pp. 29, 320. There is another problem with Scott's point, which asserts that the everyday resistance is more rational than rebellion. He needs to prove that small farmers in fact consistently cheat, trick, and subvert the landowners and the government. However, in modern Egypt, the aspects of government policy "intended to extract a surplus from agriculture, apply in discriminatory fashion to peasants, since evasion of them, legally or illegally, is directly related to farm size;" Springborg, "Agrarian Bourgeoisie, Semiproletarians, and the Egyptian State: Lessons for Liberalization," p. 464.

³⁶ Scott, *Decoding subaltern politics : ideology, disguise, and resistance in agrarian politics*.

³⁷ For the Subaltern Studies group, 10 volumes have been published from 1982 until 1999, Ranajit Guha, *A Subaltern studies reader, 1986-1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ranajit Guha,

same foundational problem of the knowing subject.³⁸ Furthermore, both do so attempting to draw on the notion of subalternity while criticising the concept of hegemony, both from the theoretical writings of Antonio Gramsci.³⁹

Timothy Mitchell argues against Scott's criticism of Gramsci, and shows how Scott's evidence can be interpreted to support the idea of hegemony rather than disprove it. Mitchell explains the two complementary strategies on which Scott relies to argue against the existence of hegemony. First, Mitchell points to Scott's definition of hegemony as too narrow. Second, he shows how Scott re-labels several of the realities of domination as "obstacles to resistance". By narrowing hegemony to mean only "ideological domination" – a false consciousness – Scott is able to use the existence of resistance to disprove the notion.⁴⁰ This however leaves a host of other mechanisms of domination, which Scott is then forced to re-label as "obstacles to resistance" or simply as "givens".⁴¹ O'Hanlon demonstrates that the same problem exist in the writing of the Subaltern Studies group, namely that resistance is construed to disprove of hegemony.

Hegemony in the above discussion is pictured as something very narrow, relating only to ideas, yet within this narrow sphere it is omnipotent and pervasive. Scott, Brown, and Guha all define hegemony loosely in the sense of "ideological dominance", as absolute domination of the mind as detached from the wider world. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that in the search for what she labels "the pure consciousness" – the autonomous subaltern subject – the omnipresent domination arises because "the association of 'consciousness' with

Subaltern studies: writings on South Asian history and society (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³⁸ On this point, both critics and supporters are in agreement, it is also admitted of a member of the project, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; see Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia Subaltern Studies. Writings on South Asian History and Society. Edited by Ranajit Guha. Oxford University Press: Delhi. Volume I, 1982, pp. viii, 241; Volume II, 1983, pp. x, 358; Volume III, 1984, pp. x, 327; Volume IV, 1985, pp. vi, 383," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no. 01 (1988); Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism," *The American Historical Review* (1994); Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak," pp. 283-6; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

³⁹ Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989); Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

⁴⁰ There is another important point here, that hegemonic domination at the level of ideas can only apply to the subjects of the study, Scott's "peasants" or Guha's for that matter. The question of their own relation to hegemony is never raised in the texts. O'Hanlon points out the significance of this silence: "if we ask ourselves [...] why we seek to find a resistant presence which has not been completely emptied or extinguished by the hegemonic, our answer must surely be that it is in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak." O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia Subaltern Studies. Writings on South Asian History and Society. Edited by Ranajit Guha. Oxford University Press: Delhi. Volume I, 1982, pp. viii, 241; Volume II, 1983, pp. x, 358; Volume III, 1984, pp. x, 327; Volume IV, 1985, pp. vi, 383," p. 219.

⁴¹ Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power," p. 553.

‘knowledge’ omits the middle term of ‘ideological production’”.⁴² “Ideological production” suggests it is necessary to go beyond the purely ideational and symbolic realm in which the above authors seek to contain hegemony, to look at the institutions that regulate the conditions for knowledge. Mitchell similarly criticises the separation between the symbolic-ideological and the material, suggesting that the Gramscian concept of hegemony can be a synthesis of notions of power across the binary of “material” and “ideational”.⁴³

There is a common definition of hegemony that gives rise to the re-presentation above of it as “ideological dominance”. An early scholar of Gramsci, Joseph Femia, defines hegemony precisely as “a situation wherein a social group or class is ideologically dominant.”⁴⁴ A second early interpreter, Thomas R. Bates, defines it as “political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class.”⁴⁵ Here I want to highlight the textual rendering of “the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class” in the passive tense – “is secured by”. The passive sense renders “the diffusion and popularisation” agent-less and leaves it as a process that simply happens. As such it removes hegemony from the realm of practice. Within this view, hegemony either is or is not, rather than being re-created through practices of power.

Bates – along with the others – defines hegemony in such a way to solve a problem created by Antonio Gramsci himself, who used the concept of hegemony in a (or rather two) very specific empirical sense(s). As part of theorising those examples, Gramsci gives three separate definitions of the term in his main theoretical work, *the Prison Notebooks*.⁴⁶ Perry Anderson demonstrates how these definitions differ due to the changing application and the evolving intellectual influences on Gramsci.⁴⁷ Anderson argues that the root cause is the separation Gramsci makes between the hegemonic position of the proletariat vis-à-vis the rural population before and during the Russian revolution, and the hegemonic position in Western Europe of the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the proletariat. Whereas in the former hegemony was used to explaining the success of a revolution, in the latter, hegemony was the organising

⁴² Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak," p. 286.

⁴³ Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power."

⁴⁴ Joseph Femia, "Hegemony and consciousness in the thought of Antonio Gramsci," *Political Studies* 23, no. 1 (1975): p. 29.

⁴⁵ Thomas R Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 2 (1975): p. 352.

⁴⁶ Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison notebooks*, European perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷ Anderson, "The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci."; see also Derek Boothman, "The sources for Gramsci's concept of hegemony," in *Rethinking Gramsci*, ed. Marcus E. Green (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, England; New York: Routledge, 2011).

principle behind the revolution's failure. Throughout, hegemony is defined variously as consent of the ruled in opposition to coercion and as a rule that combines the power of both coercion and consent.⁴⁸ Only hegemony's "consensual thread" permits the extension and unites the definitions.⁴⁹ It is on that common thread of consent that Bates, Femia and Scott spin their definitions of hegemony as (unconscious) consent to being ruled.

In no instance is the dissemination of hegemony "automatic". On the contrary, Gramsci emphasises the role of institutions in "the diffusion and popularisation of the world view."⁵⁰ According to Gramsci, hegemony is disseminated through the institutions of civil society, for instance schools, political parties, churches, clubs and journals.⁵¹ It is possible to add the media, non-governmental organisations, religious societies, charities and tribes or clans. Although that seems simple at a distance, Gramsci never specified the ways in which such a process would work. Rather he focused on the relation between civil society and the state, or power as coercion and as persuasion. That separation ultimately led Gramsci into some blind alleys, and gave rise to some of Gramsci's most contradictory claims, which Perry Anderson shows is not possible to reconcile.⁵² Mitchell points out that the two types of power that Gramsci relies on, coercion and persuasion, using the Machiavellian image of the centaur, half man and half beast, is not at all absolute. Rather, they appear separate because they correspond to the common dichotomy of mind and body.⁵³ Following this argument it is possible to go beyond the dichotomy and yet present a theory of hegemony not riveted by internal contradictions.

The suggestion is that hegemony is not purely "ideological" or "symbolic". Borrowing another point from Timothy Mitchell: although institutions appear "fixed" – like structures – they are in fact (re)created everyday through a regularised set of everyday practices structured by power relations.⁵⁴ Following along these lines, I thus define hegemony as the control over the institutions that structure the everyday of their subjects. The

⁴⁸ Anderson, "The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," pp. 18-25; see also Roccu, whose take differ in that he attempts to reconcile Gramsci's different definitions, Roberto Roccu, "Gramsci in Cairo: neoliberal authoritarianism, passive revolution and failed hegemony in Egypt under Mubarak, 1991-2010" (London School of Economics, 2012).

⁴⁹ Anderson, "The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," p. 44.

⁵⁰ Other authors, who have contextualised Gramsci's theories in light of his experiences as a male Italian Marxist political activist in interwar Europe, have hinted to similar conclusions. See e.g. Frank R. Annunziato, "Gramsci's theory of trade unionism," in *Rethinking Gramsci*, ed. Marcus E. Green (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, England ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵¹ Bates, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony," p. 353.

⁵² Anderson, "The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," pp. 20-5.

⁵³ Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power."; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish : the birth of the prison*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁵⁴ Mitchell, "Everyday metaphors of power," p. 572.

power of hegemony is not in controlling ideas but regulating practice, not limiting thoughts but determining actions. This still leaves the question of the autonomous space, the site of “pure conscience” unresolved, as one could well argue this point while keeping open the possibility of existence of such a space. In fact, it resonates with Scott when he argues that “everyday resistance” is subversive and covert because overt action is controlled and sanctioned.

Returning to Spivak’s point about the “ideological production” that separates consciousness from knowledge, I argue that institutions are such a site of “ideological production”. It is hardly controversial to claim that schools, political parties, churches and mosques deliver ideologically loaded messages. Yet other institutions such as aid organisations, companies, the market, and, most powerfully of all, the state with its laws, courts, parliament, elections, state parties, and especially bureaucracy, are also institutions that have mechanism to encourage some actions and sanction others. Throughout this, these institutions are loaded ideologically rational explaining and justifying those mechanisms. And at no point is there a border, a threshold where force turns into more subtle forms of power, rather power exist at all points simultaneously.

1.3 Hegemony and Egypt

The above outline of hegemony seems to leave little room for resistance, if any at all. This contradicts Gramsci, who as a revolutionary Marxist theorised the possibility of the overthrow of the bourgeois regimes in Western Europe. At the centre of his theories, he also developed the concept of counter-hegemony.⁵⁵ This concept suffers from the same contradictions and paradoxes that do hegemony. The contradictions of Gramsci’s text mean that this issue cannot be resolved theoretically. However, by opening the possibility of resistance (or revolution), I need to set out the parameters of its practicability. In line with my definition of hegemony as control over the institutions and ideological apparatus in society, it seems reasonable that counter-hegemony should also rely on institutions of a similar power. However, there is no certainty that such a counter-hegemonic formation might overcome the hegemonic one in order to institute its own control. And it is not possible to theorise the development of a counter-hegemonic force within a hegemonic society; the balance between stability and change is an empirical question.

⁵⁵ Gramsci and Buttigieg, *Prison notebooks*.

Turning to authors who have already employed Gramscian terms to understand the modern politics of Egypt provides some nuances to the totality of hegemony indicated above and concretises it.⁵⁶ Roberto Roccu provides the most recent contribution on Egyptian politics in a Gramscian perspective. In *The Political Economy of the Egyptian Revolution*, Roccu seeks to explain the success of the 2011 uprising as consequence of a failed hegemony. According to Roccu, through the implementation of neoliberal reforms the Egyptian elites did away with the hegemony on which Mubarak and his regime relied to claim political legitimacy and some degree of support from subaltern groups.⁵⁷ And although Roccu criticises the interpretation of hegemony as “ideological domination”, he understands hegemony’s “consent” to mean the ability of subaltern groups to accrue material benefits from the hegemonic regime.⁵⁸

This conception of hegemony opens for two criticisms, one empirical and one theoretical. I agree – as most authors do – that the current neoliberal political economics of Egypt do less for the poor than Nasser’s development state. Roccu’s argument rests on the assumption that subaltern groups in fact benefitted from it. However, as I return to below, Nasser’s agricultural system was flawed, and although some groups received entitlements that have since been removed, most of the actual benefits often disappeared through corruption or other related causes. Additionally, the agricultural system of the Nasserist state was not for the benefit of the poor farmers, but designed in such a way as to transfer the agricultural surplus to that state; it was state capitalism. Secondly, on a theoretical level, it is clear that Nasser’s state also included a powerful ideological component, which appears

⁵⁶ Joel Beinin, *Workers and peasants in the modern Middle East*, The contemporary Middle East (Cambridge, U. K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Here he draws specifically on the notion of the subaltern, which he avoids in the earlier volume on the Egyptian working class; Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile : nationalism, communism, Islam, and the Egyptian working class, 1882-1954*, Princeton studies on the Near East (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987); Roberto Roccu, *The Political Economy of the Egyptian Revolution: Mubarak, Economic Reforms and Failed Hegemony* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). For his take on Gramsci, see his doctoral thesis; Roccu, "Gramsci in Cairo: neoliberal authoritarianism, passive revolution and failed hegemony in Egypt under Mubarak, 1991-2010."; Maha Abdelrahman, "In Praise of Organization: Egypt between Activism and Revolution," *Development and Change* 44, no. 3 (2013); see also Maha Abdelrahman, "A hierarchy of struggles? The ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ in Egypt's revolution," *Review of African Political Economy* 39, no. 134 (2012); Maha Abdelrahman, "The transnational and the local: Egyptian activists and transnational protest networks," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011); Rabab El-Mahdi, "Labour protests in Egypt: causes and meanings," *Review of African Political Economy* 38, no. 129 (2011); Hazem Kandil, "Islamizing Egypt? Testing the limits of Gramscian counterhegemonic strategies," *Theory and society* 40, no. 1 (2011).

⁵⁷ Roccu, *The Political Economy of the Egyptian Revolution: Mubarak, Economic Reforms and Failed Hegemony*.

⁵⁸ Although Roccu utilises Gramsci’s terms also in his book, his most comprehensive treatment of Gramsci is in his doctoral thesis, on which the book is based. For my criticisms of his theoretical take on Gramsci, I thus rely on the thesis, see Roccu, "Gramsci in Cairo: neoliberal authoritarianism, passive revolution and failed hegemony in Egypt under Mubarak, 1991-2010," p. 62.

when farmers today draw on that ideological heritage in order to criticise the neoliberal reforms. Together, the above problems mean that his general argument – that Egypt was characterised by failed hegemony – is flawed because it underestimates the extent to which continuing control over social institutions on part of the regime enables them to resist attempts to construct counter-hegemonies.

Hazem Kandil argues that the Muslim Brotherhood did attempt to construct a counter-hegemony during the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to Kandil, through consciously using existing institutions such as political parties, trade unions, media, and courts, as well as establishing their own educational facilities, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to win the population over to its own world view.⁵⁹ Kandil first criticises the popular notion of hegemony that I outlined above, of hegemony as simply cultural or ideological. However, his analysis lapses into such an understanding. Thus in the end, he criticises counter-hegemonic strategies for failing. Not winning the majority over to their worldview – which it did – but failing to grant the Islamists in general and the Brotherhood in particular control over the state.⁶⁰ In his analysis, he thus credits the Brotherhood for the islamisation of Egypt, but explains their corresponding failure to take over power with increased regime repression. Kandil's evidence of regime repression may, however, just as easily be interpreted as a regime re-instituting its control over "the socialisation structures", passing new laws and regulations as well as amending existing ones. Through such measures, they were able to limit members of the Muslim Brotherhood's hold on the institutions, as well as limit the operation of the organisation itself.⁶¹

Although there are clear elements of coercion in the regime's approach, it also needed the consent of for example the courts for new laws to take effect – the same courts that the Muslim Brotherhood had so expertly used to further their own agenda. The paradox above arises because the realm of ideology is separated from that of behaviour. Thus, Kandil is able to ascribe the Islamists in general and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular a "worldview" based on Islam, which competes with an unspecified ideology of the regime. However, if there is one thing most rulers know, it is to draw on the popular currents of ideology to describe and legitimate their rule. Mubarak's own National Democratic Party is a case in point. So often reduced in commentaries to a mechanism for buying support, it is easy to forget that it did ascribe to an ideology of social conservatism and economic liberalism that

⁵⁹ Kandil, "Islamizing Egypt? Testing the limits of Gramscian counterhegemonic strategies," p. 46.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 55-6.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 54-5.

effectively competed with the Islamists and logically must have appealed to a part of the electorate. Thus the islamisation which Kandil credits the Muslim Brotherhood, was, if not initiated by the regime, co-opted and used by the regime to further its own agenda. I agree with Kandil's assertion that ideologies are not enough for counter-hegemony, but I disagree when he lays the blame at the feet of Gramsci. Gramsci may have understated the importance of institutional control, but he was too much of a militant revolutionary Marxist to underestimate it in actual practice. Thus, the true failed attempt at Islamist hegemony did not happen during the nineties and early 2000s, but after the 25th of January uprising. The rise and fall of Muḥammad Mursī, which I return to in chapter 5, is an interesting instance of hegemony (and a failed counter-hegemony).

There is a final problem in the texts above on Gramsci. Throughout I have used the terms of the text in question to describe hegemony's "immaterial" dimension, the space of ideologies, values, cultures, ideas and worldviews, and the multiplicity of terms needs a clarification. Returning to my definition of hegemony – control of social institutions as sites for "ideological production" – I first want to emphasise the connection between ideology and institution. Gramsci discusses the dissemination of hegemony through Ford's factories as an institution that contributes to controlling the potential for radical politics, by simultaneously using force and persuasion, for example by limiting the potential of trade unions:

Since these preliminary conditions [higher selling prices and lower production costs] existed, already rendered rational by historical evolution, it was relatively easy to rationalise production and labour by skilful combination of force (destruction of working-class trade unionism on a territorial basis) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and thus succeed in making the whole life of the nations revolve around production. Hegemony here is born in the factory and requires for its exercise only a minute quantity of professional political and ideological intermediaries.⁶²

In Gramsci's example, the ideological component comes into play when workers acquiesce to the working conditions, including the limitations in their rights. The ideology espoused through the factory is not "total" in the sense that it requires specific acts in other "spheres of life". However, by acquiescing to the conditions, the workers fail to challenge hegemony. Rather they act on hegemony's behalf by serving the existing relations of capital. Simultaneously, they are also capable of objectifying their situation, and explaining it to others. This I refer to as an "everyday ideology": the narratives that are created as workers (or later farmers and fishermen) try to objectify their situation.

Secondly, my definition points to the inherent linkage between ideology and positionality; that the power of words is mediated by and situated within a material context.

⁶² Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, *Selections from the prison notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). p. 285.

This means that words should always be interpreted in their context and who utters them. Conversely, words can also be made to reveal certain things about those who say them. Similarly, the authority of my own words derives from my position as a (white male) student at a Western university. And like my informants in Egypt, my words here can be used to reveal certain things about myself – and my politics. It leaves me with a sense of doing injustice as I structure our experiences and conversations into a coherent narrative. Furthermore, by analysing my experiences and the conversations with the villagers, I reveal and analyse their lives, and I re-present their experiences and narratives. The power to re-present them in the following narrative contrasts with the vulnerability and confusion I often experienced “in the field.” In the following section, I want to reflect on that contradiction.

1.4 Positionality and the countryside

My intention when I arrived in Cairo in late September 2012 for two and a half months of fieldwork was to study political actions of Egyptian farmers after the revolution. As I progressed, I made contact with my research assistant, who became both a friend and a research assistant. We made contact through Samuli Schielke, an anthropologist who does fieldwork in rural Egypt. My research assistant graciously invited me to join him and his family for the ‘īd al-’aḏḥā, the second largest Muslim feast of the year, which he was going to celebrate in his village. This village, located in the Kafr al-Šayḵ governorate in the Northern Delta, is where I conducted the most extensive fieldwork. Staying as my research assistant’s friend when I visited his village meant his friends also received me hospitably. In addition to the week I spent there as my research assistant’s guest for ‘īd, we went back for a further week at the end of November.

The village in question was both a farming and fishing village. Hence I was able to expand upon my original research objective of farmers, to also include fishermen, and particularly those who fish in the large mixed water lakes in the Northern Delta. There was a conflict between the farmers and fishermen. Its origin is as a conflict of interests caused by state interference under the program for land reclamation. During the 1980s and 1990s parts of the lake were dried up in order to turn shallow lake bottom into agricultural land. These are but the latest occurrences in a project that has been ongoing since the beginning of last century. However, according to my informants, it was then that the conflict damaged relations in the village. The ramification was a degree of social disconnection between the farmers and the fishermen. My research assistant, as the son of a fisherman, situated me as

his guest within that “side” of the village. Whenever I interviewed farmers, after asking about me, they would always also ask about him. And partly because I was his guest, and partly because he was a research assistant, it was not really possible for me to undertake these interviews alone. Still, at no point had I any suspicions that it affected the willingness to answer my questions.

The comparative brevity of my stay in the village limited the opportunities for observation and familiarisation. It also meant that to maximise the research, I came to rely on my research assistant and his network, which was most extensive among the fishermen and their families. As my research assistant’s guest, all the fishermen received me warmly. They also seemed eager to show me the trade union, which they were still in the process of establishing when I first arrived there. I met some of them already the first day, and I later visited an office they had set up in the village. There I met four of the fishermen that originally took initiative to found a syndicate. I met them again several times, and especially one of them, an older fisherman, became a key informant on that union. He was one of its founding members and very active in organising and formalising it. And as in any fieldwork, a lot of knowledge came to me during conversations and tales of the village. Among the most important informants in that regard was my research assistant and several of his friends.

Reaching out to the farmers in the village was done with a bit of luck and a bit by design. Again the network of which I had become a part was central. ‘Īd is one of very few holidays in Egypt where people have the ability to travel back to their native villages, and so it is also a time when people see old friends. As such, a lot if not most of the evenings were spent in a café, drinking tea. There I met a local farmer (or rather, as it turned out, a teacher who was the son of a farmer) who told me of a local branch of a newly started farmers’ union and offered to help me contact the leader for a meeting. During my two stays in the village, I interviewed him three times. Additionally I undertook interviews with three other farmers, and one agricultural engineer in the village on my second visit.

My other main source of information is the network of activists associated with the Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR). This centre, founded in December 1996, has worked with farmer related issues and problems since then. Particularly have they been active in monitoring the effects of the implementation of Law 96 of 1992, making reports of transgressions, and offering legal assistance. Throughout this process they established a nationwide network, which they have begun to organise into trade unions after the revolution.

I had initially hoped that the centre could facilitate contact with farmers who had been dispossessed of their land or otherwise had been politicised. What I did not realise was that

much of the social reorganisation caused by Law 96 was done long before the revolution albeit other connected issues remain. Thus the network that they had established by being on hand to provide assistance to disaffected farmers, they now sought to organise into syndicates. I interviewed two people that worked with the centre: one activist and researcher who worked with the farmers, and one lawyer often working with the LCHR to register trade unions. I interviewed the researcher in his home in Daqahlīya governorate.

I met the lawyer twice. Twice in his office, and once as I visited him in his home in Qalyūbīya. There, I also met three other farmers including his cousin, his uncle, and a board member for a local non-governmental agricultural cooperative. Their location in northern Qalyūbīya meant that they had a few distinct problems, particularly in relation to irrigation – in addition to those I recognised from elsewhere. The meeting with these farmers in Qalyūbīya is another example of the way networks structure opportunities and limits. Even clearer than with my research assistant, I did not feel in control of the situation, but rather as a guest – which I was. This was magnified as the interview became closer to a focus group where the questions were discussed and answered collectively. I analyse some of the consequences of this below.

Additionally, I interviewed a few other people, one of which was a professor at the American University of Cairo, with whom I discussed the general situation of farmers in Egypt and the impact of the revolution. I met a lawyer working for the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). The ECESR has been working a lot with assisting diverse groups – workers, fishermen and farmers – in order to establish independent trade unions after the revolution. He helped me understand the changing dynamics around this issue, and he gave me a very good picture of the general state of affairs on workers' rights in Egypt. A third interviewee was the founder and leader of a second trade union for fishermen based in Burj al-Burullus, with whom I discussed the situation of unions and fishermen in general, as well as the situation on the lake after the revolution. Again, the meeting with him was facilitated by the fishermen in the village offering their help and assistance with my project, which once more illustrates the centrality of the networks a researcher comes to rely on.

I also met with several of my informants more than once, especially in the village where it was common to meet with the same people in different situations. A lot of information would also appear from different, sometimes unexpected sides, generating further questions, which I would raise later. Oftentimes if I initiated a conversation by asking about events or reasons, others would also offer their opinions freely. This was mostly

relevant to the social circles closest to my research assistant such as his family and friends. They trusted me as his guest, which ultimately made me also their guest. I kept all the information from the village – as well as other interviews – in a fieldwork diary. There I wrote down interviews and other notes from observations or conversations. This journal was with me throughout my fieldwork in the village. I was also careful to note names and dates so that I could tie the information to the relevant actors. As all interviews but two were completed without the use of a recorder, interview reports were also filed in the notebook.

Another point about the village is that Samuli Schielke has often worked there. Being the second “anthropologist” in the village made for a few interesting episodes. For example, at one point when at the market with my research assistant, as I was left in the street while he was in a shop, three older men invited me to their table. They were eager to talk, introducing themselves, and asking if I was the “scientist from Europe”. During the conversation it emerged that they thought I was Mr. Schielke. And they were very disappointed when they discovered I was not. Mr. Schielke has become quite famous in the village – everyone had heard about him – and the three men had wanted to talk to this “foreigner” who kept coming to their village. His good standing in the village no doubt has made “foreigners” less “foreign”. At least, I suspect that his good standing helped to make the villagers less suspicious of my questions (and me).

There are several problems related to fieldworks and interviews, with both ethical and practical dimensions. The main rule is to treat informants with respect and integrity – also after the fieldwork is finished. General issues and dilemmas associated with observations and interviews are treated thoroughly elsewhere,⁶³ but I wish here to emphasise some concrete problems arising from my own fieldwork. One particular problem arising from fieldwork and “participant observation” is that it is not always clear which role I’m in with respect to the informed consent of informants. I met a number of people in different ways. Some I spoke to in conversational settings, such as in cafés, or on home visits. Other times I had scheduled interviews. Quite a few times in the village I simply met people and started asking them about different topics. The blurring of the lines between interviewing, questioning and conversing described above leads to a certain blurring of the lines of the informed consent. Things could have been told me in confidentiality. Since I was open about my project

⁶³ For a general discussion of observation, see e.g. Tove Thagaard, *Systematikk og innlevelse: en innføring i kvalitativ metode* (Bergen: Fagbokforl., 2009). esp. ch. 4. On interviews, see Steinar Kvale, “Det kvalitative interview (Appendix 2),” in *Valg af organisationssociologiske metoder-et kombinationsperspektiv*, ed. Ib Andersen (Samfundslitteratur, 1990).

throughout my fieldwork I have however no reason to believe that I was given information that my informants did not intend for me to use.

The nature of the information conveyed also creates difficulties, especially in relation to the anonymity of my subjects. In general I experienced a very high degree of willingness to answer my questions, and on more than one occasion people actively sought me out with relevant information. Yet the topic was political in nature, which historically has been and still can be touchy in Egypt. Nonetheless offers of anonymity were declined, and simultaneously politics were openly discussed in cafes and in the street. And some people were interviewed in their official capacity, which means that I cannot establish their authority without giving away some clues to their identity. However, given the shifting circumstances in Egypt, I have chosen to leave my informants anonymous. While I have given some information out of necessity, it means that I must obscure some other information, which I would otherwise have liked to include.

Some methodological points that give rise to practical difficulties also need to be noted. The formal interviews I undertook were semi-structured. That is, I prepared a list of themes and questions in advance of the interview while leaving room for follow-up questions. This also accounts for the farmers where I had a list of questions that I prepared as a starting point. Not all farmers were asked all questions, and I often came across new and interesting ones during the conversations. As such, semi-structured interviews are often dense with information, but the results are not always directly comparable. For example, one of the questions I asked was on the farmers' view of the Principal Bank of Development and Agricultural Credit (PBDAC). The question was not applicable to many tenants because the bank takes security in the land. As tenants they cannot offer security. They still sometimes have a general opinion on the bank, and asking them could lead to reflection on the position and role of farmers.

A few of the interviews ended up as group interviews rather than with a single interviewee. This led to added dynamics, and an open space for discussion to which I could listen, highlighting differences of opinion on controversial subjects. In this way, as Brandh discusses, group interviews can highlight conflicts, but also agreements within the group.⁶⁴ It can also build confidence among otherwise suspicious informants. In at least one instance having two interviewees together made it easier to speak about social and political issues. The openness of one of the informants made the other feel more secure when he told his

⁶⁴ Berit Brandh, "Gruppeintervju: perspektiv, relasjoner og kontekst," in *Kvalitative metoder i samfunnsforskning*, ed. R. Kalleberg and H. Holer (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998), p. 163.

views. However, as I also experienced, sometimes informants can withhold opinions and information due to the other members of the group. During my interview with informants in the Qalyūbīya village, they frequently mentioned a local, farmer-initiated cooperative (as opposed to the local branch of the government agricultural cooperatives). This initiative was generally cited as a success providing cheaper fertilizers and seeds. One of the farmers present served as the cooperative president. As he left the group while the others, who were relatives of my host remained, they gave other and seemingly more candid descriptions of the cooperative, saying it no longer functioned as well as it had used to. It was becoming somewhat of a store and had started providing not only agricultural inputs but also washing machines and refrigerators. This they claimed was making the farmers in the hamlet less interested in participating. Having often found myself in similar situations, it is possible that such mechanisms – deferring one's opinion to maintain the group harmony – have happened at other times too.

There is another issue at stake here as well, that of language. All my interviews save the one with the AUC professor were conducted in Arabic. And although I am adept, Arabic is a language both difficult and with a wide register. There were problems especially relating to technical terms – though these lessened, and more seriously to dialects. Due to my language training in Damascus, I am more familiar with the Syrian dialect, and I did find the local dialects challenging especially among the older generations in the countryside. But I was mindful of the problem, and, as a foreigner, my informants were very patient when explaining to me. In the village I was also with my research assistant, and was able to discuss with him and clarify points I was unsure about.

Only twice did I use a recording device during interviews. Not using a recording device was a conscious choice deriving from certain perceived problems. The local farmers' union leader was interviewed both with and without the recorder and I found him much more relaxed without it. Based on this experience I decided to proceed without the recorder. It could be coincidence, but it could also be suspicion generated by life in an autocratic state. Other informants might not have restrained themselves in the presence of the recorder, but it was not a chance I wanted to take, especially as writing interview reports based on notes taken during the interviews worked well.

Again, the above highlights an underlying theme here, namely that fieldwork is also a personal experience. As I retrospectively reflect on the fieldwork it seems to me that in many respects my native village in Norway is just as far from the centres of capital as the villages I visited. Many of the underlying problems are the same. On an abstract level, the driving

forces for “change” seem to be power of market forces. Rural life is now about production of food, yields, cost-effective production, investment opportunities, consumer needs and economic growth. Under the hegemony of these and similar terms, the experiences of farmers and fishermen have become a secondary issue. Security of livelihoods is not a concern for the market. The adverse effects of market rule, its human cost, are not an issue that surfaces in many development reports. They are at best marginal concerns among the development and state agencies, just as the countryside is seemingly on the margin of the economy. And yet, as Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata pointed out, “in capitalism the margin is the profit.”⁶⁵

If there is a purpose here, it is to be able to question some of the hegemonic ideas, the taken for granted notions, about what rural life is and what it should be. I doubt if I can say what villagers really are *like*, neither there or here. I hope to say a little bit about what it means or might mean to be a villager.

⁶⁵ Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Shehata, "The secret capital," (Presentation at the Centre for Islam and Middle East Studies, Oslo 2013, 19. April).

2 “What do I do for dinner?” Market reforms and agriculture

We want to see Egypt being the Mecca for investors
Former Prime Minister Hisham Qandil⁶⁶

Egypt today is a country for sale. You can buy everything, but you cannot get anything
without buying it.
Fisherman, Kafr al-Šayk⁶⁷

The complaints of farmers revolve around the unfavourable position they have in the chain of agricultural production. With a gradual liberalisation of the Egyptian agricultural system over the past quarter of a century, the market has become the prevalent mechanism for guiding and regulating agricultural production. Due to several reasons, however, the market relations work to the disadvantage of small farmers and tenants. One informant from a village in Kafr al-Šayk gave as an example the cotton harvests. He said that to grow one acre worth of cotton required 3-4000 Egyptian pounds in seeds, fertiliser and pesticides, and another 4-5000 pounds in work to harvest. The cotton harvest from that acre would be worth around 7000 pounds.⁶⁸ Thus even the best of cases leaves the farmer without a profit, and potentially, harvesting the cotton causes him to lose money.

The difficult situation of farmers in the market causes a gradual increase in daily social hardship, which in turn negatively affects their future prospects. Reem Saad has highlighted the “costs of coping”.⁶⁹ She analyses the strategies used to cope with the negative impact of law 96 of 1992, which caused many tenant farmers to lose access to land. Coping with the diminished livelihoods, these former farmers resorted to taking children out of school, eating less and cheaper food, taking loans, and child labour to generate income. These measures were short term and meant that long-term improvement would become even more difficult.⁷⁰ Ray Bush similarly finds that the market reforms negatively affects the most vulnerable among the rural poor.⁷¹

⁶⁶ From the Euromoney Egypt conference in October 2012, quoted in Ahmad Shokr, "Reflections on Two Revolutions," *Middle East Report* 265(2013).

⁶⁷ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 29.11.2012

⁶⁸ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 30.11.2012

⁶⁹ Reem Saad, "Social and Political Costs of Coping with Poverty in Rural Egypt," in *Fifth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting*, ed. European University Institute (Florence 2004).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ray Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," *Review of African Political Economy* 27, no. 84 (2000): pp. 242-3.

Simultaneously, farmers asserted in interviews that the state institutions built under Nasser's regime to regulate the agricultural sector have become dysfunctional.⁷² Groups with privileged access now often use these institutions, especially the agricultural cooperative societies and the village banks, for their benefit. As agricultural institutions created to assist farmers, they are now mechanisms to enrich selected networks of patronage.

2.1 The shortcomings of agribusiness

Since the early 1980s, international development agencies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have all advocated the same brand of neoliberal development ideology. The government of Egypt has been under pressure by these institutions as well as the United States government to accept economic and political reforms along neoliberal lines. This neoliberal reform program has framed agricultural policies in Egypt since the mid-1980s. Since then several legal and practical changes sought, in the language of reforms, to liberate the markets from repressive state regulations. The reforms in the agricultural sector were guided by the assumptions of agricultural export led growth. This model suggested that liberalising the market in the agricultural sector for inputs, produce and land, would attract investment. This investment would turn Egypt's agriculture into profitable agribusiness focused on supplying the European winter market for vegetables and cut flowers. Within the model, Egypt's favourable climatic conditions and cheap labour costs would make Egyptian produce competitively in the international market.

The first reforms were implemented in 1986. They focused primarily on "creating" a market for agricultural products, both inputs like seeds and fertilisers, and for the harvests. The Ministry of Agriculture gradually removed crop allocation and delivery quotas along with the price regulating policies on the harvests. Previously farmers had been forced to deliver percentages of their yearly harvests of certain staple goods and cash crops: predominantly wheat, barley, rice, cotton and sugar. To begin with, the regime abolished controls for all grains except rice, cotton and sugarcane. By 1992, only sugarcane cultivation was still regulated by the state.⁷³ The story of liberalisation is only partly true, however, because even though the Ministry of Agriculture abandoned the control of crop areas and

⁷² Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 26.10.2012; Cairo, 20.11.2012; Daqahliya, 26.11.2012; Qalyūbiya, 2.12.2012

⁷³ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 249. See also Simon Bromley and Ray Bush, "Adjustment in Egypt? The political economy of reform," *Review of African Political Economy* 21, no. 60 (1994): p. 209.

quotas, and allowed private actors to import wheat, it still controlled around half of the domestic production, along with processing and marketing. Simultaneously the Ministry of Supply continued to buy large quantities of wheat for the state owned bakeries providing subsidised bread. Thus price controls lingered on in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Hence, former president Mursī was able to promise on the 9th of September 2012 an increase in the gate prices of rice. The problem is that the price rise of rice was not reflected in the market where the vast majority of farmers operate.

Market reforms also demanded the liberalisation of agricultural land, the single most important factor of production, and perhaps the single most important part of the reforms. Liberalising the laws that regulate landholdings proved to be one of the most contested parts of the reform. Law 96 of 1992 thus became one of the cornerstones of the reforms. The law, officially named “the law to regulate the relationship between the farmer and the tenant”, aimed at liberating the land from state regulations, which meant removing the protections tenant farmers enjoyed vis-à-vis landowners. The law changed the stipulations for renting land, and removed the security of tenancy that tenant farmers had enjoyed since the land reform laws of the Free Officers. Centrally, the law removed price controls on the rent of land, which led to rapid and significant increases in prices. Secondly, they removed the demand that contracts needed the approval of both parties to be terminated. In effect, tenants whose contracts had been hereditary and who had inherited the land they lived off, and thus felt a strong entitlement, lost their entire claim to it, when after a five year transition period, the law was implemented in 1997.

The rational of the law was nominally to make it easier to buy and sell land through investment landholdings, which would, according to neoliberal thought, be more effective. This was part of the reforms’ rational; to create space for an agribusiness sector, which was to become the engine for agricultural export-led economic growth on the model of Chile.⁷⁴ Specifically, the prescription is for the promotion of a horticultural sector, which would export high-value fruits and vegetables to the European market. A decade after the reforms, the agribusiness sector was still failing.⁷⁵ Critical studies have revealed serious problems relating to the rational of the reforms, both practical and theoretical. To begin with the latter, the invoked model of Chile originates with the liberalisation carried out by the Pinochet-government in the 1980s. As such, along with South Africa and New Zealand, they pioneered

⁷⁴ John Sfakianakis, "In Search of Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: The Political Economy of the Export Agribusiness Sector in Egypt," in *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside: Land and Farmers in the Era of Economic Reform* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

⁷⁵ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," p. 238.

a market in off-season fruits and vegetables during the winter months. Yet Chile was a newcomer in the market while Egypt has to compete with several established producers, which alongside the above-mentioned countries include Israel, Brazil, Argentina, India, USA and Kenya.⁷⁶

The classic economic problem of late-coming is accentuated by severe structural difficulties relating to infrastructure and bureaucratic capabilities. The underlying cause is the nature of Egypt's crony capitalism in which there is no pressure on the state apparatus to improve the facilities for exporting horticultural produce. Sfakianakis finds that all the dominant actors in the sector have attained their position through connections within the state bureaucracy, and access to credit and information. This means that only existing elite businesspeople have the ability to invest in this sector, or indeed invest in any sector.⁷⁷ They in turn have no interest in reform of the system, in which they are the beneficiaries. Agribusiness then becomes a venerable side project and nothing more. As one of Sfakianakis' informants put it:

I am happy with my exports and the fact that I am making money out of my grapes and strawberries. It is nice to say and for people to know that you have a successful and big agricultural project – after all there is an important connection between the people of Egypt and agriculture – but the real money is outside this sector; for example, I have this real estate project.⁷⁸

The quote is reproduced because it captures so well the discrepancy between economic praxis – where the money lies, in this case in real estate – and the official rhetoric that hails agribusiness as a future growth sector for the Egyptian economy.

Despite the failure of the agribusiness sector, the proponents of reform have never re-evaluated the undertaking. Both the IMF and the government have defended the successes of the agricultural reforms by pointing to production increases in the main staple foods such as rice and wheat.⁷⁹ Yet, while critical observers agree with the nominal increases in production, they also point to two problems. Bush, for example, emphasises that the increases seem to be generated by farmers through new cropping patterns and improved yields rather than as a

⁷⁶ Sfakianakis, "In Search of Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: The Political Economy of the Export Agribusiness Sector in Egypt," p. 70.

⁷⁷ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 282-6.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Sfakianakis, "In Search of Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: The Political Economy of the Export Agribusiness Sector in Egypt," p. 65.

⁷⁹ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," pp. 237-8; Bush, "Land Reform and Counter-Revolution," pp. 13-7; Ray Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 8 (2007); Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 250-1. See also Bush, *Economic crisis and the politics of reform in Egypt*.

response to higher prices.⁸⁰ Mitchell adds that prior underreporting of production yields at least in part caused the initial, statistical gains.⁸¹ He also points out the irony that production increases in basic cereal production is cited as proof of the success of liberalisation reforms, when the intention was for farmers to grow more high value crops, fruits and vegetables, for export. Growing basic crops such as wheat, barley, maize and rice in stead was in fact a move “not toward the market but toward increased self-provisioning and protection from the market.”⁸² Along the parameters of the linear understanding of reform success, the agricultural sector reforms have been a failure, moving farmers towards self-provisioning.

There is other evidence that supports this conclusion. One of the main arguments of the government in favour of a law was the need for investment, which the landowners would provide, according to the argument. Tenants, on the other hand, were unable to invest in agriculture because they were either too lazy or too poor.⁸³ The supporters of reform combined the two mutually exclusive representations into a campaign for the law and against the tenants. There is little evidence to prove the existence of the ostentatiously wealthy tenants too lazy to invest in the land. There is however a lot to suggest that many tenants were too poor to invest. And the government abetted this situation when it changed the Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit (PBDAC) from an institution tasked with offering capital to farmers into a commercial bank. By transforming the bank, the government limited and removed smaller farmers’ access to credit. Other subsidies that contributed to the farmers’ profits were also cut. For example, the ministry ended subsidies to help mechanise agriculture and assist farmers in purchasing tractors. As a sign of the times, Mitchell observed that farmers in one village had started to reintroduce animals such as cows and camels to do farm work, replacing tractors that had previously dominated.⁸⁴ This is another instance in which the reforms got the opposite result of what was claimed. It is logical to expect increased investment in agriculture to cause further mechanisation of agriculture. A de-mechanisation points to the opposite result.

2.2 *The social networks of markets: The “crisis of fertiliser”*

⁸⁰ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," p. 238.

⁸¹ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 251.

⁸² Ibid., p. 252.

⁸³ Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," pp. 106-8; Robert Springborg, "State-Society Relations in Egypt: the debate over owner-tenant relations," *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 2 (1991): pp. 240-1.

⁸⁴ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 253-4.

Returning to the liberalising market reforms, one important part of removing the state's influence was to also remove its control of the input sector. Here the state was present as a provider and producer of subsidised fertilisers, seeds and pesticides. The implementation of the liberalising project in this sector sheds light on the shortcomings of the reforms, and how they have suited the interests of certain groups close to power. In 2005 several cases of food poisoning led to an investigation that revealed how government employees including an undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, had taken advantage of their position to import and market the pesticides that caused the food poisoning. At the same time, however, the ministry had dissolved the committee tasked with supervising pesticide imports, making it easier to import the low-cost, hazardous pesticides.⁸⁵ This shows the double roles many of the "reformers" in government had, also being among the actors in the "liberalised" markets.

Another example is the market for fertilizers. Egypt has one of the most fertiliser intensive agricultural systems in the world. The Aswan High Dam enabled year round irrigation based crop cultivation in Egypt because the yearly Nile floods were contained, but so were the silt that had for centuries provided nutrients for Egypt's agriculture. To counterbalance this the Egyptian government started to provide subsidised fertilisers through the agricultural cooperatives in a system where the government regulated production, distribution and pricing. During the seventies, the PBDAC assumed this function though mostly it operated out of buildings of the cooperatives. As part of the reforms, the state gradually withdrew from this market between 1988 and 1992 and allowed private sector actors to import and purchase domestically produced fertilizer. Thus it was estimated that by 1992 the private sector's share of this market was at around 75 percent.⁸⁶

Private actors have dominated the market for fertilizers since, enjoying sizeable profits while farmers find that their margins are squeezed. Several of the farmers I interviewed stressed that the cooperatives still provided some fertilizers, but very little and sometimes too old. At the same time, the market saw prices double that. One farmer put it like this: prices for one bag of "urea" stood at 76 Egyptian pounds in the cooperative, while "nitrat" was available for 74 pounds. In the market, the prices reached more than 150 pounds for each bag of fertilizer.⁸⁷ Other informants also claimed that the prices in the market are much higher than in the cooperatives, and similar stories were reported in the newspapers,

⁸⁵ Yasmine Fathi, "Surviving the Watermelon," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 755, 11. August 2005.

⁸⁶ Mylene Kherallah et al., "Wheat policy reform in Egypt: Adjustment of Local Markets and Options for Future Reforms," in *Research Report* (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2000), p. 21.

⁸⁷ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 30.11.2012

citing instances of prices reaching 170 and even 180 Egyptian pounds.⁸⁸ Such price hikes happen almost yearly, and especially during the planting season, when farmers need fertiliser the most. This “crisis of fertiliser” recurs almost every year with nominal prices doubling or even tripling. As most farmers lack the storage facilities and the capital to buy the fertiliser when it is cheap, merchants can double their money for the same fertiliser when demand soars.

Even though the government officially has sanctioned the breakup of the distribution monopoly of the PBDAC, farmers and media alike continue to denominate the market in fertiliser as a black market.⁸⁹ As such it confirms findings in a previous study that farmers continue to view the cooperatives as not just an input supplier, but the legitimate input supplier.⁹⁰ The study, carried out in Qīnā and Aswān in 1995, assesses the impact of the reforms on farmers’ perceptions of the cooperatives. One of the findings is that small farmers continued to view the cooperatives in more positive terms than farmers with larger landholdings. This suggests that smaller farmers are not able to navigate the market and thus continue to rely on the cooperatives.⁹¹ Hence there is a continuous demand for the services of the state cooperatives to operate. Simultaneously, the state remains a notable producer and supplier of fertiliser through state owned factories.

The same study shows that richer farmers are much less positive towards the cooperatives, and more positive towards the market. Abdel Aal suggest that the larger landholders have the financial and logistical resources – that is, the money and the connections – to better take advantage of the opportunities provided. There are examples from the fieldwork that substantiate this claim. Some farmers in a village in Northern Qalyūbīya had set up a private cooperative in 2005 to take advantage of the opportunity. By pooling their resources and buying in larger quantities they had been able to get better prices on the private market. The private cooperative had initially been very successful by focusing on the basic needs of the farmers, like fertilisers and pesticides, but the same farmers claimed that it was now corrupted and inefficient.⁹² The cooperative had started to provide additional services and marketing everything from agricultural machines to laundry machines and

⁸⁸ Ašraf Fikrī and Akram 'Abd al-Raḥīm, "Irtifā' si'r asmida al-yūryā.. wa "al-ḡuraf al-tijārīya" yuḥammil bank al-tanmiya al-mas'ūliya," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 6. July 2012.

⁸⁹ Conversation, Kafr al-Šayḵ, 25.10.2012

⁹⁰ Mohamed H. Abdel Aal, "Farmers and cooperatives in the era of structural adjustment," in *Direction of change in Rural Egypt*, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins and Kirsten Westergaard (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 296-7.

⁹² Interview, Qalyūbīya, 2.12.2012

refrigerators. Other farmers also failed to contribute their share thus reducing the efficacy of the cooperative, and by now the farmers had withdrawn because they no longer got advantageous prices.

The experiment of the private cooperative illustrates both the ability of some farmers to gain from the market, and the difficulties for smaller farmers to do so. It was the bulk purchases that made the private cooperative profitable to begin with, but with diminishing interest in the venture the profits were reduced. Due to distrust between some of the members and the leader of the cooperative – I was presented with allegations of corruption – I suspect that a dwindling membership mass had caused the venture to be less profitable. Richer farmers are not presented with such a need for transparency. Thus they are much more able than poor farmers to reap the benefits of the market. Smaller farmers are on the other hand doubly cursed. Unable to benefit directly from the market, the alternative of creating institutions to compensate requires additional social capital they may or may not have access to.

There is a second, historical, reason that contributes to the ability of richer farmers to take advantage of the market. That the market is at all called “the black market” testifies to its creation not due to the reforms, but due to the controls of agricultural production under Nasser. The black market arose at the demand of richer farmers and rural notables with networks that made it possible for them to circumvent the production restrictions that the state had imposed. Accordingly, the rural upper class that also circumvented the ownership restriction on land, were already by the time of the reforms embedded in market networks from which they benefitted. Farmers that depended on the agricultural services of the state institutions like the village banks and the cooperatives lost their support and were forced onto a scene in which they had not experience. There they faced established structures, including merchants who had already entered into mutually beneficial oligopolistic arrangements.⁹³ In Egypt’s countryside, “markets” are better understood as a web of social relations of which the exchange of goods is but one aspect.

Thus “the market” creates differing logics for different farmers given that they are unequally positioned within these social networks. Malak Rouchdy, writing on the history of landownership in a Delta village called Batra, provides an interesting example of how the mutuality of political and economic power dominates the village.⁹⁴ Rouchdy tells the story of

⁹³ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 244-56.

⁹⁴ Malak S. Rouchdy, "Change and Continuity in the Village of Batra: Family Strategies," in *Directions of Change in Rural Egypt*, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins and Kirsten Westergaard (Cairo: American University in Cairo

a field merchant called Hag Latif Nigma, who came up through his relations with one of the leading landowning families, the Fakhri, in the village. Hag Latif Nigma made his wealth through the marketing of fruits during the 1960s and 1970s, eventually monopolising the marketing of the crop from the Fakhri estate. However, after a falling out between Nigma and the Fakhri family, the family sought and found other buyers for their crop, ultimately accepting a lower price, but they were able to break his monopoly. The break-up of relations between Nigma and the Fakhri family were caused by perceived transgression on their land and authority. Through his economic position, Hag Latif Nigma was able to gain considerable political power in the village, although his position was later undermined by the break in his relations with the Fakhri family. Rouchdy concludes by noting the shifts in the merchant classes following the market reforms, which seems to challenge some of the field merchants, like Hag Latif Nigma, and reinforcing market relations.⁹⁵

The story of Hag Latif Nigma and his relationship with the Fakhri family can be made to illustrate a few aspects about the power relations of the market in Egypt. First, Hag Latif Nigma – as the Fakhri family – made his fortunes through fruits and vegetables, a sector in which the rural upper class centred their production to avoid state regulations. The comparatively free market in fruits led to it being from Sadat's years a sector dominated by the large landowner and rural notability. Secondly, the relationship between Nigma and the Fakhri family shows the social aspect of market relations in the villages. Nigma was the preferred salesman of the Fakhri family in part because the family needed to stand on good footing with important power brokers in the village, of which Nigma was an accepted representative. Yet when the relations between Nigma and the Fakhri family soured, the latter were able to break off their reliance on Nigma since they won over large parts of the village to their side in the struggle. The motivation behind this move was political, not economic, because the Fakhri family accepted a lower selling price. Finally it is clear that the many small farmers and peddlers in the village that were dependent on Hag Latif Nigma did not have an equal opportunity to navigate the market in a similar way. They are caught in an economic dependence portrayed as social relations.⁹⁶

Press, 1998).

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 248-52.

⁹⁶ The same social relations also appear in other sectors, for example fishing (see also the next chapter). About the fish farm workers next to Lake Manzala, Fatemah Farag reveals

The relationships between local residents and more wealthy outsiders are demonstrated in Umm Mohamed's business, which is supplied by a merchant who makes regular visits to the area. Using a traditional barter system, the merchant, says Umm Mohamed, 'gives us rice, flour and inputs for the fisheries. We go to him if we need cash for a doctor or something like

2.3 The social networks of market reforms: A free market for fertiliser

Returning to the history of the fertiliser market, a closer look at the implementation of the market reforms shows the underlying problem of the reforms. When the government ended its regulatory authority, an oligopoly of three producers assumed the control of the “market.” By exporting fertiliser abroad, the domestic supply diminished and the prices quadrupled in the early nineties, according to Mitchell.⁹⁷ No challenge to the market power of the oligopoly ever emerged from the regime or the international financial institutions. During the 2000s the export of fertilizer continued and grew considerably. As a country well endowed with both natural gas and rock phosphate, two key ingredients, Egypt is well suited for production of fertiliser. And it is especially competitive in the international market given the huge subsidies on petroleum products.

The fertiliser industry is one of the major consumers of natural gas in Egypt, and natural gas alone accounted for 40 percent of the total expenditures of the petroleum subsidies in the fiscal year 2005/06 – although it declined to 21 percent the following fiscal year – while the remainder subsidised prices of diesel, gasoline varieties, LPG and fuel oil (māzūt).⁹⁸ The subsidy ratio for natural gas reached 77 percent that year; that is, the domestic price was on average 23 percent of the international price. In all, energy subsidies are by far the biggest post in the government subsidy program, and four fifths of the subsidies go to energy intensive industries like cement steel, aluminium and fertiliser.⁹⁹ In Egypt, the natural gas the state so heavily subsidises, contribute to give the fertiliser factories very reliable and competitive terms, by evening out the fluctuating market prices on natural gas. Those fluctuations included a massive top in late 2005 and early 2006, which then the government

that. He keeps all these items listed on a piece of paper.’ Once the fish harvest is sold on the market, the merchant deducts the cost of the items he had advanced the fish farmers, plus a certain agreed percentage in lieu of interest.

The merchant in other words did more than just buy the produce. The fish farm workers are in a dependent relationship that structures their options in the market; that is, they do not really have an option as this cannot be called a “market relation” in the conventional meaning of the term. Fatemah Farag, “Engineering Conservation,” *Al-Ahram Weekly* 641, 5. June 2003.

⁹⁷ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 261.

⁹⁸ Abdallah Shehata Khattab, “The impact of reducing energy subsidies on energy intensive industries in Egypt,” in *The Egyptian Economy: Current Challenges and Future Prospects*, ed. Hanaa Kheir-El-Din (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 273-4; this chapter also exist as Abdallah Shehata Khattab, “The impact of reducing energy subsidies on energy intensive industries in Egypt,” in *Working Paper No. 124* (Cairo: The Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, 2007). See also Soheir Abouleinein, Heba El-Laithy, and Hanaa Kheir-El-Din, “The impact of phasing out subsidies of petroleum energy products in Egypt,” in *Working Paper No. 145* (Cairo: The Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies, 2009).

⁹⁹ ‘Amr Ādlī, “Da’m al-Ṭāqa fī-l-muwāzana al-miṣrīya: namūḍījan li-l-ẓulm al-ijtima’ī,” (Cairo: Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, , 2012); Shokr, “Reflections on Two Revolutions.”

ended up financing. And the fertilisation industry alone accounts for nearly a tenth of the total consumption of natural gas in Egypt, and a quarter of the consumption if the sole biggest post – production of electricity – is left out. As such, petroleum products account for by far the largest share of the government's subsidy program.

The reasons for the priorities of the government are connected to the networks that influence policy decision in Egypt. As an important constituency of the Mubarak regime, a class of elite businessmen close to the regime had a significant ability to influence regime decisions including the pace and the direction of the privatisations. This was to ensure that the reforms did not threaten to eliminate the advantages from which these businessmen benefitted, or their privileged access to information and decision makers.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the state sought to maintain its role as a distributor of rents, and the crony capitalists' protected monopoly or oligopoly positions hinged on this ability.¹⁰¹ The result was that privatisation was never carried out quite in the way it was imagined.

Privatisations did nonetheless offer up opportunities for new networks that linked in particular state officials and former bureaucrats. Take for example the Abū Qīr fertiliser factory in Alexandria. The government of Egypt included it as a privatised company under law 203. This was the law that listed the companies that were to be privatised, and organised these under different holding companies tasked with selling them. The shareholders in the Abū Qīr plant after the privatisation were however not private enterprises but various government entities. A report prepared for USAID later acknowledged that privatisation had not corrected the flaws in the fertilizer market: "despite the [holding company]'s divestiture of Abou Kir [sic], privatization has not been able to spur competitive forces or any new market entry into this segment of the Egyptian fertilizer market."¹⁰² The "privatised" company was able to keep the regulations that made it profitable all the while profits ended in personal rather than public bank accounts.

Such underhand methods happened in other sectors as well, where "the state" was supposed to relinquish its control. Sfakianakis describes identical practices in the privatisation of the cement industries in Egypt.¹⁰³ In brief, former bureaucrats and public sector managers used their position to take over the "privatised" state owned enterprises

¹⁰⁰ John Sfakianakis, "The Whales of the Nile: Networks, Businessmen, and Bureaucrats During the Era of Privatization in Egypt," in *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East: The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, ed. Steven Heydemann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 86.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 91-3, 97-8.

¹⁰² Privatization Coordination Support Unit, "The Results and Impacts of Egypt's Privatization Program," (Provided to the United States Agency for International Development by Carana Corporation, 2002), p. 53.

¹⁰³ Sfakianakis, "Whales of the Nile."

while the state's holding companies also kept sizeable ownership shares. The private sector business elite shied away from these "privatised" companies and did not acquire shares. They made the most money as "suppliers and subcontractors" in "multiple and diversified operations."¹⁰⁴ Another of the regime's strategies was to establish parallel business ventures. When cement factories were finally privatised and sold to foreign investors in the late nineties because the government needed the income, the regime linked business elite, like the Sawiris family, was simultaneously given licences for additional cement factories. Cement was at the time an extremely profitable industry due to the building boom Egypt experienced at the time.¹⁰⁵ Thus the regime managed to "privatise" profitable state owned ventures, while keeping their business constituency happy by giving them lucrative contracts.

The Sawiris family also operates in the fertiliser market. The family's holding company Orascom owns two fertiliser plants, built in 1998 and 2007 respectively. Combined they have the potential to manufacture more than any other "private" producer of fertiliser in Egypt, of which, the Abū Qīr factory is the biggest. The two Orascom-factories are however both located on the Suez Canal. There they can produce for export to an international market where the factories are competitive thanks to the lucrative benefits accorded them by the Egyptian government in return for "investing in" the country. Yearly domestic fertiliser production in Egypt far outweighs consumption. The production potential of both factories are enough to make up the gap in domestic supply during the planting season when the "crisis of fertiliser" recurs.¹⁰⁶

Smaller farmers, the vast majority of farmers in Egypt, have neither the storage facilities nor the capital to buy their fertiliser supplies in advance. In the year round agriculture of Egypt, they buy the necessary inputs for one season with the profits from the preceding harvest. However, in conditions of an inelastic demand, that is a demand that is less responsive to the changes in price, the conditions are ripe for hoarding, speculation and monopolisation. Accordingly, farmers without the economic or social capital to circumvent these market deficiencies are caught in the grinder between merchants and "the silent compulsion of economic relations", as Marx called the imperative of everyday survival.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁰⁵ For additional details on this, and its links between state and private finance, see Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 272-82; Sfakianakis, "Whales of the Nile," pp. 94-7.

¹⁰⁶ Maṣṣūr Kāmil, "Al-Ḥukūma tunāqīš ḥall 'azmat al-'asmida kīlāl al-mawsam al-zirā'i al-ḥālī," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, August 15 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 1: p. 899.

2.4 Everyday ideology: The hegemony of the market

This market is a social institution given its “form” by the networks within which it is practiced – that is, acted out. This applies whether it is on the top of society, where the business elites meet the regime power brokers, or if it is in the marketplaces of the villages. Understanding the market as an acted out institution also opens for understanding it not in its economic sense of offer and demand, but as a network of social relations. Finally, as a network of social relations, the market is a network of power relations, both at the local level and at the “national” level. The last claim I make is that the market is a hegemonic institution, and hence that the power relations of the market are part of the institutions of hegemony.

The “silent compulsion of economic relations” effectively structures people’s lives. During the market reforms, securing a descent living has become harder for both economic and ecological reasons.¹⁰⁸ The economic reforms of the eighties and nineties have caused an estimated loss of over 700 000 jobs in the countryside altogether, and conditions have become more difficult for those who continue to work the land.¹⁰⁹ One of the farmers I encountered in the fields whose total landholdings amounted to less than a third of an acre, also worked as a day labourer for the village fishermen. Besides the seasonal proceeds from the rented land, where most of it was household production, a day of work for the fishermen brought in about five Egyptian pounds: “Five pounds is enough to buy lunch for me and my family, but what do I do for dinner?”¹¹⁰ These words describe his situation caught between the limitations of the market and the “silent compulsion of economic relations”. It is an expression – an “ideological production” of an everyday ideology – of power as regulating behaviour rather than thoughts.

Another farmers expressed the same exasperation the following way: “The farmer works all day, every day, and if he doesn’t work, he only hurts himself.”¹¹¹ The farmer again expresses a feeling of imprisonment in the work relation; that he has no option but to keep working. He too expresses a dependence on capital that limits the options of protest. It is an ideological statement that any act of opposition would ultimately “hurt himself”. This everyday ideology is the corresponding version to calls about the necessity of “stability” that international financial institutions and the government of Egypt makes. “Stability” means the

¹⁰⁸ Saad, "Social and Political Costs of Coping with Poverty in Rural Egypt."

¹⁰⁹ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," p. 238.

¹¹⁰ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

¹¹¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 30.11.2012

continuation of status quo, and the maintenance of the existing economic relations. Hence for the farmers “stability” means the continuation of work “all day, every day” – without protest.

The power of the market is that it structures the actions of farmers, merchants and businessmen alike. And even though several of the farmers oppose the market as an organising ideal of agricultural production, they are nonetheless compelled to deal with it. In the neoliberal age, the market has become the organising principle not just in the marketplace, but also for the organisation of vast parts of society. That is the lesson of the fisherman’s words of Egypt as “a country for sale”.¹¹² Powerful forces within the state and without, including the international financial institutions, the capitalist elites and the bourgeoisie class promote this ideology. Turning Egypt into a “Mecca” for investors translates to assuring the stability of the “free” market, but with little considerations for those caught in the web of dependence disguised as “market relations”. Yet by organising the agricultural sector thus, “the market” has become inescapable to farmers. And throughout the expansion of “the market” – or the idea of the market – as the preferred principle for organising production in Egypt, it has changed the position of farmers and forced many to enter into new social relations in which they are at a disadvantage.

¹¹² Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 29.11.2012

3 “They are the authorities”: state, market, farmers, and fishermen

The neoliberal reforms were supposed to remove the presence of the state from the agricultural sector in order to liberalise the market. As I argued in the previous chapter, the market is a social institution, made up of networks in which power relations are the organising principle. When discussing the market, the state never seems that absent. When the business elite competed for privileged contracts and preferential access, the decision makers were the state’s bureaucrats and regime politicians. Thus, the state’s agents control the market, but are in turn dependent on the powerful actors in society.

The ties between economic and political power holders, between “state” and “market”, are replicated in the villages. In Malak Rouchdy’s account of the village of Batra, he explains how the dominating position of the different families in village politics rest on their economic power and the social position that affords them. Small farmers, who are dependent on the larger for access to irrigation pumps and markets, as well as more direct financial and social support, find it hard to challenge their dominating position. The large farmers – the rural bourgeoisie – in turn use their dominating socio-economic position to reinforce their political status through their ability acts as intermediaries with the state’s institutions. This intermediary role in turn situates the rural bourgeoisie within the state’s network of patronage, and the resources that entails.¹¹³ However, as the state relies on the social status and economic power of rural landowning families and mercantile upper class, these social groups are able to use state institutions to their benefit. State run institutions like the cooperative societies and the village banks became embedded in the established relations of power in the countryside. Below I argue that this was – if not explicitly intended – the result of regime choices in the 1960s. According to Hamied Ansari, a political effort to mobilise the farmers caused increasing social upheaval, which in turn made conservative and statist forces within the regime realign the state with the interests of the rural bourgeoisie through a strategy of “retraditionalisation”.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Rouchdy, "Batra," p. 252.

¹¹⁴ Hamied Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*, SUNY series in Near Eastern studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

3.1 The social origin of state interests

The international financial institutions promoted the market reforms, but in Egypt they were ultimately carried out in a prolonged negotiation process between regime figures, business elites and different interest groups. Agriculture was one of the first sectors to be subjected to such reforms. Agriculture became an initial site for reforms because those controlling the sector – and the state institutions within the sector – were able to shape the reforms in accordance with their interests. The rural bourgeoisie and large landowning families had over time monopolised the access to the state and the regime. Networks extended well into the ministry of agriculture and in parliament, and the cooperative union and the PBDAC were under control. The entrenched position of these classes was in turn the result of state policies under Nasser and Sadat's presidencies.

The large landowning families had been the backbone of the monarchy that ruled under British suzerainty in the post-colonial era. When the Free Officers' took power, one of their first acts was to announce the land reform law, or law 178 of 1952, which put a ceiling on landownership. Initially, the law determined the ceiling to be 200 acres for individuals, and 300 for a father with two sons. The ceiling was later reduced to 100 acres in 1961, and a further decrease in 1969 saw it reduced to 50 acres. Sadat quickly reversed the latter change, however, on his ascension to the presidency. The state appropriated excess land was by in return for government bonds, and plots were then sold to landless agricultural workers and tenants. It is estimated that the land reform laws led to the redistribution of approximately 12-14 percent of the total cultivated area.¹¹⁵ Additionally, the 1952 law fixed rents and demanded that rental contracts last at least three years. Lastly, the law established a minimum wage for agricultural workers. In addition to the regulations established by law, the Free Officers established agricultural cooperatives for the beneficiaries of the land reforms to secure the small farmers' access to seeds, fertiliser and pesticides as well as a selling point for the agricultural produce. The agricultural cooperatives were since expanded to include not just the land reform beneficiaries, but also other farmers in Egypt.

The land reform laws of the Free Officers were also pursued in the interest of breaking the economic – and thus political – power of the big landowners who until then had dominated the political scene in the country. Absentee owners were affected, but many of these families had by then become established in the cities. For the tier below the richest,

¹¹⁵ Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt," p. 1601.

who had kept their links with the land, the laws failed. Most of these families were able to spread their holdings on several members, while they continued to farm the land as one unit. The land laws were gradually rolled back through these families consolidating their holdings as well as their hold on power. The way in which Nasser's land reforms were undermined reveals the nature of power and its dispersion through networks in rural Egypt.

Law 96 of 1992 reversed the last vestiges of the land reforms, namely the security of tenancy that tenant farmers had enjoyed. Immediately after it was passed by the parliament the law tripled rents on land. After a five year transition period, it removed the regulations on rent altogether. The second part of the law made it possible for landowners to unilaterally end tenancy agreements. It made it possible for landowners to "reclaim" land that they had "lost" to tenants.¹¹⁶

Law 96 of 1992 came about partly due to the IMF reforms, and were presented as a part of that reform package. Yet the drive to liberalise the restrictions on land ownership and the associated land accumulation antedate the implementation of the economic reform program of the IMF. The official reforms in the agricultural sector were linked with the appointment of Yūsuf Wālī as Minister of Agriculture in 1982. From his appointment to his dismissal in 2004 he was running the ministry of agriculture and its extensions, like the PBDAC, as an extensive network of patronage.¹¹⁷ Yūsuf Wālī was the grandson of Amīn Wālī, one of the largest landowners in Fayyūm. He not only represented the large landowners; he was one. He and his extended family benefitted directly from the reversal of Nasser's land reform laws. His appointment for the job was symbolic of the rural classes that had become the regime's primary constituency since Nasser's "failed revolution", namely the rural bourgeoisie and the old landowning class.¹¹⁸ The reforms from 1986 onwards were in line with the economic interests of the larger landholders and the rural bourgeoisie. For example, removing crop allocation regulations and forced delivery quotas enabled the rural bourgeoisie to transfer more of their land into fruit production, which was more lucrative market than that of staple crops.¹¹⁹

Ultimately the reforms continued and sanctioned the developments in the countryside since the 1970s. Through law 96 alone, it was estimated that 432,000 tenant farmers (out of a total of 905,000) lost their access to land. And only 1.5 percent of those affected were

¹¹⁶ Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," pp. 115-8.

¹¹⁷ Sfakianakis, "In Search of Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: The Political Economy of the Export Agribusiness Sector in Egypt," p. 59.

¹¹⁸ 'Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 226.

actually compensated with plots in the reclaimed lands, which the government promised when it implemented the laws.¹²⁰ However, the land that tenants lost overwhelmingly returned to the landholding families of 1952. That land added to another 900.000 acres, which had already shifted from the hands of tenant farmers to landowners prior to the law.¹²¹

The rural notables and upper class farmers, the driving forces of this reversal of the land reform laws, had been growing in economic power and political importance for some time. It is visible in the landownership statistics, where holdings of ten acres or above were recovering from the impact of the agrarian reforms already in the 1970s. Springborg, analysing the agricultural censuses of 1982, uncovers the trends that have dominated Egyptian agriculture since. There was a division into a smallholder sector and a capital-intensive sector. This was accompanied by a growing inequality in access to land, which manifested as land loss by small holders and a decrease in the rented area. This in turn forced small holders to seek off-farm employment. Simultaneously the larger landholdings increasingly claimed both the cultivated area and the high-value production.¹²² Between 1977 and 1982 the largest absolute increase in overall land gains came for landholdings between 5-10 acres, followed by those between 10-50 acres. Smaller holdings on the other hand became more numerous, but failed to expand in terms of acreage. This means that more farmers had to divide less land among the smallholders, while the big farms got bigger. Hence already the Sadat era was “characterised by increasing inequality of access to land.”¹²³ Despite the laws that were nominally still in place, the effects of the land reforms of 1952 were being reversed on the ground.

The beneficiaries at that time were particularly the rural middle and upper classes. Waterbury suggests them to be those with landownership of ten to fifty acres whose ownerships were untouched by the successive agrarian reform laws.¹²⁴ With their economic power intact and with the economic power of the upper stratum of landowners challenged, this segment could be expected to take over power locally. There was indeed a shift in the power holders, but that shift was subtler than what Waterbury claims: “The biggest beneficiaries were large landowners living in the countryside [...] able to preserve and often enlarge their holdings.”¹²⁵ The rural bourgeoisie did so by dividing up their land among

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 265.

¹²¹ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium," p. 244.

¹²² Springborg, "Rolling Back Egypt's Agrarian Reform," p. 28.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 30.

¹²⁴ John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: the political economy of two regimes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

¹²⁵ Mitchell, "Fixing the economy," p. 94.

several branches of the extended family, and was thus able to circumvent the law. Through such extended family networks, they thus kept their hold on local power.

In Rouchdy's village of Batra, stories of the influential families illustrate the above statistics and trends.¹²⁶ The Khalil-family, for example, was in the middle of the twentieth century the largest landowning family in Batra, with holdings of seven hundred acres. Owing to the land reform laws, the Khalil family, which at that point still owned the land, but were unable to farm it directly, started to sell out. The Yasin and Yusif families bought most of the land. Both families had started as labour supervisors for the Khalil family, but had as the Khalil moved to the city, been running the estate by subletting properties on a sharecropping basis. They had established control over the farmers through monopolising the marketing of their crops.¹²⁷ In this case, the land reforms did not break the power of landowners, but simply shifted the power from the absentee owners to the rural bourgeoisie. The power of the latter became more firmly established as they acquired ownership to the landholdings.

The Khalil described above lost the land because they no longer had any direct links with it. Another landowning family of Batra, the Fakhri family, managed to keep parts of their land as they still administered it at the time of the land reforms. Though they were forced to sell some land to tenant farmers. Ali Fakhri also tried – but failed – to avoid losing the additional land in excess of the 100-acre limit by registering it in the name of his children. After the land reforms the Fakhri family's holdings were almost halved, 85 acres compared to 175 before.¹²⁸ The story of the Fakhri family demonstrates the significance of direct links with the land; the links that the Khalil family lost as absentee owners.

The two stories from Batra also reveal the ways in which the rural bourgeoisie remained as a class despite the loss of power of some families. In the countryside and in the villages, their hold on power was never seriously threatened. Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Diyāb calls the Free Officers' regime social transformation for "the aborted revolution". Diyāb argues that the regime, despite aiming rhetorically for social liberation, failed to change the existing class structures in Egypt.¹²⁹ The government, according to Diyāb, became a victim to the state's internal "interest groups" because it did not allow for the influence of society or social

¹²⁶ Rouchdy, "Batra."

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 241-3.

¹²⁸ Ibid., pp. 243-8.

¹²⁹ Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ Diyāb, *Intifādāt am Tawrāt fī Tārīk Miṣr al-Ḥadīth*, 1. ed., vol. 20, *Silsilat al-Tārīk: al-Jānib al-Āḡar: T'ādat qirā'ah li-l-tārīk al-miṣrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Šurūq, 2011). pp. 193-207.

movements.¹³⁰ At the local level, according to Sayyid ‘Ašmāwī, this meant that the rural bourgeoisie and their agents became intertwined with local village councils, local party branches and cooperative councils, and were able to use these institutions to influence state policies.¹³¹ In other words, because the Free Officers isolated the decision-making apparatus of the state from society, the regime became vulnerable to pressure groups within the state apparatus. As an educated middle class drawn from the city bourgeoisie and the upper stratum of landowners staffed the state, over time the interests of these classes came to dominate the state apparatus.

3.2 After Kamšīš: The social foundation of the state’s institutions

Hamied Ansari identifies the breaking point when the power struggle within the expanding state shifted decisively in the direction implied by Diyāb’s and ‘Ašmāwī’s assertions.¹³² According to Ansari, the chain of events that started in 1966 in Kamšīš, led the conservative forces within the regime to ally with the statist forces against the radical faction associated with ‘Alī Šabrī, which had been ascendant until then.¹³³

The events of Kamšīš refer to the murder of the socialist activist Šalāḥ Ḥusayn Maqlad. His death was supposedly the work of the Fiqī family, the old landowning family in Kamšīš, against whose political and economic domination of the farmers, Ḥusayn fought. More to the point, he used his position within the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) to mobilise the farmers, and call for even more radical redistribution of land. His murder, partly through coincidence, received national attention and forced the regime’s hand. In response the Free Officers set up the Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism (HCLF) to investigate the power relations in the countryside.¹³⁴

The investigations of the HCLF uncovered a potential social upheaval in the countryside over which the regime was losing control. The Committee was nominally set up to investigate lasting “feudal” relations in the countryside, but instead it uncovered the way in which the upper stratum of landowners

continued to exert influence over high levels in local government and the party despite tight screening procedures imposed on the selection of key party officials. At the local levels, the families that traditionally controlled the ‘umda post continued to enjoy unmitigated influence

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 204-5.

¹³¹ ‘Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*: pp. 210-1.

¹³² Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*.

¹³³ Anwar Sadat’s ascension to the presidency confirmed this process which ultimately culminated in the ousting of ‘Alī Šabrī.

¹³⁴ Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*: ch. 1; Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 169-70.

in the local communities.¹³⁵

The HCLF investigation also confirmed that the upper stratum families divided their holdings among the family members, so that no one member owned more than the legal limit. By activating extended family networks, they maintained control over land and local politics. Political control during Nasser was based on the administrative apparatus of the government and of the (single) party. And the HCLF found that the social hierarchy among the rural elites was replicated in those organisational hierarchies with political influence extending all the way to the urban centre of power.¹³⁶ The investigations of the Higher Committee also revealed that the revolutionary changes were in part created by the regime as it attempted to mobilise the rural population, but it had lost control over the process to independent actors like Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn.

The ASU – where Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn was a member – was created by the regime to mobilise the farmer for its political purposes. Hani Fakhouri, in a study of *Kafr El-Elow* describes how the villagers are appropriating the political rhetoric of the regime.¹³⁷ However, the ASU was only the political arm part of the regime's quest for control over the countryside, which also agricultural cooperatives came to be an integral part of. Firstly, all members of the cooperatives also automatically were members of the party, illustrating the connection between the two institutions.

Secondly, the agricultural cooperatives were disciplining institutions. The first cooperatives had been established for the beneficiaries of the land reforms. The initial idea – and it is worth noting that private cooperative societies have been present in Egypt since the 1920s – was that state provided expertise and inputs would offset production decreases expected as a result of the land reforms. However, through the cooperative system, where the farmers received seeds, agricultural expertise, credit in return for selling fixed quotas of most grains and cash crops at fixed prices as well as regulating the market, the state managed the agricultural production. Through the system the state appropriated the agricultural surplus. Farmers, albeit indirectly, became state employees. Returning to Fakhouri's text, in the chapter on the agricultural cooperatives, it is noted that the agricultural cooperative employs twelve guards and a supervisor who monitored the farmers' debts and secured the cooperative its due.¹³⁸ There was in other words a system of supervision and of labour discipline in place

¹³⁵ Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*: p. 118.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 138-40.

¹³⁷ For an example of this mobilisation, see Hani Fakhouri, *Kafr el-Elow: an Egyptian village in transition*, Case studies in cultural anthropology (New York,,: Holt, 1972). p. 108.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

through the cooperatives.¹³⁹ A further example illustrates the underlying power of the cooperatives, and the way it organised the economic relations between the regime and the farmers:

In May 1982, the Egyptian Government began to stage pre-dawn raids on villages in the Nile Delta. Police troops, helmeted and heavily armed, roused villagers from their homes. Masked informants identified suspects from the resulting line ups. In Daqahiliyya Province alone fourteen thousand peasants were dragged before the courts. When the police could not find the suspects they were hunting for, they sometimes took members of their families hostage – a standard technique used to intimidate the political opposition. But the villagers arrested in these raids were not members of the political opposition. They were merely peasants who had failed to grow the government-mandated quota of rice.¹⁴⁰

The regime in the 1950s and 1960s needed to appropriate the agricultural surplus in order to finance the large development projects of the time. Thus, the mobilisation effort in the countryside was more than a political effort. It was also an effort to mobilise and control the economy, both the natural and human resources at the behest of an expansive state apparatus.

The mobilisation efforts increased in the middle of the 1960s as the regime faced its first economic slump. According to James Toth, a recession in 1965-66 was caused by a crisis in agriculture that began in 1961.¹⁴¹ Rural labour had moved from agricultural work to the large national development schemes, the High Dam and land reclamation projects in the Tahrīr-province. Recurring crop failures due to labour shortage meant that agriculture had failed to deliver the surplus that the government needed to finance the industrial development. The search for hard currency compelled the government to negotiate with the IMF, which forced a devaluation of the currency of 14 percent.¹⁴² Rising living costs hit the rural poor hard, with rural wages dropping 10 percent in real terms between 1965 and 1967. Following the hardships, “public protests, marches, and hunger strikes were organised in the provinces, particularly in the Delta around large towns like Disuq, Damietta, Kafr al-Shaykh, and Damanhur.”¹⁴³ It was against this backdrop of increased mobilisation and ensuing unrest that Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn was murdered. Conservative and statist factions within the regime feared instability and social upheaval associated with the politics of popular mobilisation, and turned to a strategy of “retraditionalisation” to regain control over the countryside. The defeat in

¹³⁹ Hans Holmen, "Agricultural Co-operatives in the Rural Development of Egypt: A comment," *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 56, no. 4 (1985): p. 555.

¹⁴⁰ Yahya M. Sadowski, *Political vegetables? Businessman and Bureaucrat in the Development of Egyptian Agriculture* (Brookings Institution, 1991). p. 51; quoted in Ninette S. Fahmy, *The politics of Egypt : state-society relationship* (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 217.

¹⁴¹ James Toth, *Rural labor movements in Egypt and their impact on the state, 1961-1992* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); James Toth, "Rural workers and Egypt's national development," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1994).

¹⁴² Toth, "Rural workers and Egypt's national development," p. 39.

¹⁴³ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 168.

June 1967 accelerated this process, though it had already been under way by then. The rural elites were re-emerging at the centre and in the countryside.

The appointment of Sayyid Mar'ī as minister of agriculture is one symbolic example of turnaround in the mid-1960s. Mar'ī was from an old landowning family, and one of several with such family connections that emerged close to power at that time; in 1969 thirteen of the families investigated by the HCLF had members elected to the National Assembly.¹⁴⁴ Under Sadat, Mar'ī began to reverse the agrarian reforms despite that he had helped engineer them to begin with.¹⁴⁵ The rapid re-emergence of the rural elites and landowning families in official political positions imply that their economic and social power had never been effectively broken, even at the height of the revolution.

Locally, next to the political institutions associated with the government and the state party, both the agricultural cooperative societies and the village banks formed the base of landowners' control. This role for the rural elite became more pronounced with the regime's lack of interest in the "penetration of mass society" under Sadat and Mubarak.¹⁴⁶ The cooperatives offered the control of considerable farming inputs and access to credit – prior to 1976 when they were temporarily abolished and replaced by the village banks. For example several of the families investigated by the HCLF had members placed as directors, accountants or board members.¹⁴⁷ By 1969 the strategy of "retraditionalisation" also influenced law making. Through law 51 of 1969 the regime helped the rural upper class fasten its hold on the agricultural cooperatives. The law raised the land ceiling from five acres (applicable to eighty percent of the board seats) to ten acres, and literacy was made a condition for election.¹⁴⁸ Particularly the latter change excluded many small farmers from participating in elections, while the former made it easier for local landowning families to fill the board with agents.

The rural upper class has since controlled the cooperatives. Abdel Aal writes that in 1995 there was still a "clear reflection of the village power structure in the membership of the cooperative board."¹⁴⁹ One of my informants, an activist with the Land Centre for Human Rights, put it this way: "there is still a structure but it has no role."¹⁵⁰ Other farmers

¹⁴⁴ Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*: p. 146.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 76, 148; Raymond Hinnebusch, "Egypt Under Sadat: Elites, Power Structure, and Political Change in a Post-Populist State," *Social Problems* 28, no. 4 (1981): p. 458.

¹⁴⁶ Hinnebusch, "Egypt Under Sadat: Elites, Power Structure, and Political Change in a Post-Populist State," p. 460.

¹⁴⁷ Ansari, *Egypt, the stalled society*: p. 130.

¹⁴⁸ Fahmy, *The politics of Egypt : state-society relationship*: p. 209.

¹⁴⁹ Aal, "Farmers and cooperatives," p. 298.

¹⁵⁰ Interview, Daqahlīya, 20.11.2012

concurred that the cooperatives were ineffective and had stopped providing any services. The continued existence of the formal hierarchy, however, suggests that the board members are able to benefit through the connections such positions enable. Smaller farmers, on the other hand, ignore the cooperative boards or accuse board members and officials of being corrupt.¹⁵¹

Another example of the entrenched position of the social and economic hierarchy within public institutions is the village banks under the authority of the PBDAC. During the seventies and eighties it overtook the role of the cooperative as parastatal institution tasked with providing credits to farmers.¹⁵² The role of the cooperatives was briefly transferred to the PBDAC after Ahmed Yunis, the then head of the central agricultural cooperative union (CACU) challenged president Anwar Sadat in the 1970s.¹⁵³ CACU established in 1970 to coordinate the agricultural cooperatives as well as maintain state control over these institutions. Ahmed Yunis used it as a base from which to challenge Sadat's power. As a result, the entire union was disbanded in 1976, and several of the cooperatives' functions were transferred to newly created village banks under the PBDAC umbrella. Although the cooperatives were partly resurrected a few years later, the regime took steps to ensure that they could no longer be used to rally support and create independent positions of power. And the PBDAC and the village banks were better suited to distribute rents within the patrimonial networks.

After the reforms of the nineties the PBDAC became a regular bank albeit the government still owned it. Informants report that the PBDAC now charges interest rates upward of twelve to fifteen percent making loans prohibitively expensive for the farmers provided they are able to access them, which most are not.¹⁵⁴ Access to loans is tied to the patronage networks within the Egyptian civil service, which ties the rural elites to the centre.¹⁵⁵ For farmers with small land holdings, access to cash and credit is limited. The limitation hampers their ability to invest or manage the land sustainably, but it is caused by the monopolisation of access to subsidised capital by the upper stratum farmers.

Nonetheless, the limited opportunities for poor farmers to access capital and therefore to invest in the land, was one of the regular arguments for the neoliberal reforms in general

¹⁵¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 25.10.2012

¹⁵² Holmen, "Agricultural Co-operatives in the Rural Development of Egypt: A comment."

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 559-60.

¹⁵⁴ Interview, Qalyūbiya, 2.12.2012

¹⁵⁵ Sfakianakis, "In Search of Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: The Political Economy of the Export Agribusiness Sector in Egypt," p. 59.

and law 96 of 1992 in particular.¹⁵⁶ The question is: why were there no reforms of the credit distribution system? Although agriculture is highlighted as a growth sector within the economy, little or no consideration has been given to opinions and needs of the smaller farmers. Ray Bush has called the regime's catering to the interests of rich businessmen and the failing agribusiness sector "an agricultural strategy without farmers".¹⁵⁷ It is an apt description of the current agricultural policies where the interests of small farmers and tenants are systematically excluded.

The exclusion of small farmers' interests has historical reasons related to the formation of the state of the Free Officers. This state relied on a corporatist strategy towards society whereby institutions and organisation were co-opted and frequently economic benefits were traded for political quiescence. The notion that this state had autonomy from society conceals the significance of the internal interest groups within the state's institutions. That is not to say that the state was a mere tool for private interests. Within the state and within the Free Officers' regime there were factions with different ideological outlooks. In terms of rural policies where agricultural policy is a key part, it first was a testing ground for the mobilising policies of the radical faction of 'Alī Šabrī, but later became dominated by the conservative factions which aligned with a broadly statist current within the regime. These two factions primarily sought stability at a time when the social upheaval in the countryside reached a breaking point symbolised in the events of Kamšīš.

The regime groups also sought and depended upon social support. In the case of rural politics during the seventies and eighties that support increasingly came from the rural upper class. The state's reliance on the landed rural interests also led to them being represented in the state's rural institutions, such as the cooperative boards, local councils and village bank boards. The power of these institutions and the resources they gave access to, further augmented and complimented the position of the rural landowners. In turn this social group sought to shape the agricultural policies in accordance with their economic interests. The confluence of interests did not happen overnight. The policies – like law 96 of 1992 – often took time to be implemented, as different networks and alliances struggled against each other and against other interests within the state apparatus. However, the overall direction of public

¹⁵⁶ On the public and parliamentary debate on agriculture and especially Law 96 of 1992, see Raymond Hinnebusch, "Class, State and the Reversal of Egypt's Agrarian Reform," *Middle East Report* 23(1993); Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law."; Springborg, "Rolling Back Egypt's Agrarian Reform."; Springborg, "State-Society Relations in Egypt: the debate over owner-tenant relations."

¹⁵⁷ Bush, "An agricultural strategy without farmers: Egypt's countryside in the New Millennium."

policy was one of increasing complicity with the economic interests of the dominant rural classes.

The expansion of the state apparatus in the countryside through the institution also had an ideological justification. Although the Free Officers implemented the land reforms law in 1952 with a social justification, the regime did not espouse a broader revolutionary programme at the time. However, during the 1950s, the regime gained a more coherent ideology centred on nationalism and anti-imperialism.¹⁵⁸ The consecutive name changes of the single party set up by the regime illustrate the developing ideology. Initially it was started as the Liberation Rally in 1953. First it changed to the National Union in 1956, and to the Arab Socialist Union in 1962. Yet throughout the ideological cosmetic changes, from national liberation to pan-Arabism to (Arab) socialism, progressivism remained at the heart of the ideological expressions. It was this progressivism that was disseminated through the cooperatives and – after 1962 – through the ASU. As an ideology it justified the forms of power that the expansive state employed in order to structure and regulate agricultural production. Part of the success of the rural landed interests in the eighties and nineties was to present their class interests in the language of reform.

On the other side, the efficacy of this strategy is also evident, as informants would draw on “Nasserist” ideology and notions of food security and national development to criticise the market reforms. The state of the Free Officers succeeded in expanding its apparatus and establishing an institutional hegemony in the countryside. However, these institutions became embedded in the social relations of the countryside, and as such they augmented the power of the local landowning class. More importantly, through monopolising control over these institutions the landowning class also gained access to the central state, as is evident in the recurring appointment of its members in influential positions, particularly relating to agricultural politics. And through that access agricultural policies came to reflect the class interests of the rural landowners.

3.3 Fishing for profit: State, market and fishermen

Neoliberal ideology, disseminated through the international financial institutions, justifies the market reforms by framing them as policies of progression. Neoliberal progressivism has a different content than the Nasserist version, meaning that it identifies other problems and authorises differing solutions. Nevertheless, the market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and

¹⁵⁸ See for example Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir, *Falsafat al-tawra* (Al-Qāhira: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1955).

the 2000s, consistently frame the market as a necessary institution for development – a hallmark of modernity. IMF, the World Bank and other large aid organisations continuously prescribe “the market” as the only way to develop and grow the economy.¹⁵⁹

To extend and clarify the argument about the market reforms, state policies, international development programs in rural Egypt, and hegemony, I want to look at the fishing sector. Fishing was never controlled in the same manner as agriculture. The General Authority for Fish Resources Development (GAFRD) regulated fishing, but it was never subject to the same degree of institutionalised control; the only exception was fishing in Lake Nasser. There the origin of the lake as the by-product of a national development project made lake fishing regulated from the beginning.¹⁶⁰

In the last two decades, fishing has come under increasing pressure from the growth of aquaculture; that is, fish farming. While historically fishing in the four lakes in the northern Delta between Alexandria and Damietta was under pressure from agriculture through land reclamation projects, recent years have seen the expansion of another threat: the fish farms. The forces behind this development reveal the operation and the relations of power in the countryside.

The four lakes are separated from the sea by a narrow tongue of land covered in sand that stretches from Alexandria to Damietta. From west to east, the four lakes are Maryūt, Idkū, Burullus and Manzala, the two easternmost being the largest. They are all brackish, receiving water from both the Nile and the Mediterranean. They are also shallow, with neither Lake Burullus nor Lake Manzala being deeper than 2 metres at the most, and Burullus is a mere 40 centimetres deep at its Eastern end. Marshlands used to surround the lakes, but these marshes have largely been drained to increase the land available for agriculture.

Land reclamation has historically been the biggest threats to the lakes. Under the development state of the 1960s and 1970s the lakes were further drained, even though such projects continued well into the 1990s.¹⁶¹ The impacts of these policies on the lake are evident in the surface area statistics. Ray Bush and Amal Sabri estimate on the basis of GAFRD that of the officially registered lake surface areas in 1956, by 1998/1999 62 percent

¹⁵⁹ See Mitchell, "Fixing the economy." There he questions the idea of "a national economy".

¹⁶⁰ The exception was Lake Nasser in southern Egypt, created by the Aswan High Dam in 1964. Reforms of the fishing sector there closely resemble the trajectory of the liberalisation reforms in agriculture. See Christophe Béné, Bastien Bandi, and Fanny Durville, "Liberalization Reform, 'Neo-centralism', and Black Market: The Political Diseconomy of Lake Nasser Fishery Development," *Water Alternatives* 1, no. 2 (2008).

¹⁶¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 25.10.2012

of Lake Manzala, 88 percent of Idkū and 61 percent of Maryūt had been lost – to roads, fish farming or agriculture.¹⁶²

Land reclamation projects were common already during the monarchy. Parts of the marshlands on the southern and south-eastern borders of Lake Burullus had been drained in the twentieth century, and the lake surface had shrunk from an estimated 600 square kilometres to 460 in 1974.¹⁶³ The GAFRD-statistics used by Bush and Sabri show only limited decreases in the lake surface area between 1956 and 1989. However, another survey based on satellite images of the lake shows the decrease from 1973 to 2011 to be from 430 square kilometres to 246, with significant decreases in every decade up to and including 2000-2010.¹⁶⁴ The discrepancy between the two numbers for the early seventies is explained as the latter survey also includes plant overgrowth and expanding islands when calculating the lake surface. Thus, not all the lake loss is due to land reclamation projects alone, but a combination of agricultural expansion and overgrowing that slowly deprives the fishermen of their livelihoods.

The other threat to the lakes is pollution. The proximity of Lake Maryūt to Alexandria means it has been used as a dumping ground for factory waste, pollution and waste disposal for Alexandria's industry. Those who used to live off the fish are no longer able.¹⁶⁵ Lake Idkū is also seriously threatened by industrial pollution, and the coastal highway has been built through the lake, dividing it into two. Lake Manzala receives most of its freshwater from the Damietta Branch of the Nile meaning that Cairo's waste and sewage makes its way there.¹⁶⁶ The fishermen are aware of the poor conditions of the lake – and the reasons. A labour union leader expressed it like this: "you can see [the pollution] if you put your hand in the water, and after one week or two, your hand will be sick. We used to drink the water and cook with it, now you can't put your hand in the water without getting ill."¹⁶⁷

Prior to the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the Nile still partially flooded the Delta. During the yearly floods, Burullus and the other lakes were replenished, and waste that

¹⁶² Ray Bush and Amal Sabri, "Mining for fish: Privatization of the commons" along Egypt's Northern coastline," *Middle East Report*, no. 216 (2000): pp. 22-3; Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailian, "Doubly dispossessed by accumulation: Egyptian fishing communities between enclosed lakes and a rising sea," *Review of African Political Economy* 39, no. 133 (2012): p. 412.

¹⁶³ Henri J Dumont and Gamal M El-Shabrawy, "Lake Burullus of the Nile Delta: a short history and an uncertain future," *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36, no. 8 (2007): p. 677.

¹⁶⁴ Hesham M El-Asmar, Mohamed E Hereher, and Sameh B El Kafrawy, "Surface area change detection of the Burullus Lagoon, North of the Nile Delta, Egypt, using water indices: A remote sensing approach," *The Egyptian Journal of Remote Sensing and Space Science* 16, no. 1 (2013): p. 122.

¹⁶⁵ Amira El-Naqeeb, "Fishing for Lake Mariout's last hope?," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 935, 19.-25. February 2009.

¹⁶⁶ FR Siegel, ML Slaboda, and DJ Stanley, "Metal pollution loading, Manzalah lagoon, Nile Delta, Egypt: implications for aquaculture," *Environmental Geology* 23, no. 2 (1994).

¹⁶⁷ Interview, Burj al-Burullus, 27.10.2012

came with the Nile and the drainage canals was washed into the ocean. Now the main freshwater supply is the rivers and drainage canals, meaning that the lakes functions like sinks for pollution and waste. Burullus is fairing better with regards to pollution, as the main water supply comes not directly from the Nile but from the Delta drainage canals. However, the nutritious agricultural waste, including high levels of fertiliser, causes the lake to become eutrophic – meaning that animal life is threatened as decomposing flora deprives the lake of oxygen, and accentuates the overgrowing.¹⁶⁸

Simultaneously, both the number of fishermen and the average yields in Burullus are increasing so that there is more pressure on the fish resources. Dumont and El-Shabrawy claim that historically, between 5000 and 8000 fishermen lived off the lake and fished it artisanally. Now the authors estimate that around 20 000 fishermen are dependent on the lake for their livelihoods.¹⁶⁹ The increased pressure on the lake is also evident in the yearly yields. While they were stagnant at 4000-6000 tons of fish per year after the building of the Aswan High Dam, from 1986 on the reported yields increased to more than 50 000 tons per year.¹⁷⁰ There are sure signs that the current levels are unsustainable. Fishermen reported signs of overfishing to me, saying there was less fish in the lake, fewer types of fish, and that the fish had become smaller in size.¹⁷¹ Dumont and El-Shabrawy again report that the average fish size decreased by 30 percent during the 1990s, which is “a sure sign of overfishing”.¹⁷² And other reports support the fishermen’s claim that there are fewer types of fish, registering a reduction in commercial fishing varieties from 47 types of fish to 17.¹⁷³

The yields increases are simultaneous with the growth of aquaculture in the inland lakes, and FAO attributes all of the above growth in fisheries production to aquaculture.¹⁷⁴ The rapid expansion of aquaculture began in the late 1990s. Aquaculture has existed in Egypt for a long time, but it was a marginal subsistence activity, far from the modern industrial aquaculture. The first commercial fish farm was established in 1961, but the take-off came only after the World Bank along with USAID started a program advocating and supporting the expansion of the fish farming sector during the last twenty years. The fishermen on the

¹⁶⁸ Dumont and El-Shabrawy, "Lake Borullus of the Nile Delta: a short history and an uncertain future," p. 677.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 680.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 681.

¹⁷¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

¹⁷² Dumont and El-Shabrawy, "Lake Borullus of the Nile Delta: a short history and an uncertain future," p. 681.

¹⁷³ Farag, "Engineering Conservation."

¹⁷⁴ Cited in Michael Zwirn, "Aquaculture in Egypt: Improving food security and resolving resource allocation conflicts," *The Journal of Environment & Development* 11, no. 2 (2002): p. 130.

lake however also distinguish between the two forms, and they oppose the industrial, not the traditional, fish farms.¹⁷⁵

Travelling the coastal highway from Alexandria to Rosetta through Lake Idkū, the square ponds that stretch along the coast and well into the lake are a prominent feature. I observed similar sights along the borders of Lake Burullus, and all the way to Burj al-Burullus. The sector has expanded rapidly (and illegally) to cover considerable parts of the lake coasts.¹⁷⁶ As part of the expansion, fishermen lose both parts of the lake and access to it, as the fish farms gradually enclose the lake. The most common form of lake aquaculture is in freshwater pens separated by mud dikes. By turning lake commons into privatised ponds they prevent fishermen from using the coastlines to access the lake. Travel distances become longer and harbouring options more limited for the artisanal fishermen, while the lakes are gradually subjugated to a de-facto process of enclosure.

The official accounts of the fish farms' success that the development agencies promote stand in sharp contrast to some realities on the ground. Among others they are claimed to create employment opportunities, ensure a cheap and adequate protein supply for the poor and to increase per capita fish consumption.¹⁷⁷ And in terms of production, the success of aquaculture is clear. It is now estimated that two thirds of all fished consumed in Egypt is grown in privately own, industrial farms.¹⁷⁸ Yet, for example on creating work opportunities the image is at best mixed. GAFRD estimates that the fish farms sector created around 25 000 jobs, comes at the cost of the 20 000 artisanal fishermen of Lake Burullus, and other thousands in the other lakes that rely on the lakes for their livelihoods.

The impressive production statistics are also problematic. Although the tonnage is considerable, the intensive production brings with it a host of environmental problems. The most widely used intensive pond aquaculture in the lakes depletes the water by intensively cultivating the fish through high stock density. The high density makes the fish vulnerable to diseases, and antibiotics are added in sizeable amounts. This along with exogenous fodder depletes the water, which adds to pollution of the lake when it is dumped and replaced with fresh water.¹⁷⁹ A further problematic practice of the fish farms is harvesting the fish fry and

¹⁷⁵ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

¹⁷⁶ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012; Burj al-Burullus 27.10.2012; Bush and Sabri, "Mining for fish: Privatization of the" commons" along Egypt's Northern coastline," pp. 23, 45; Malm and Esmailian, "Doubly dispossessed by accumulation," p. 415.

¹⁷⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "National Aquaculture sector overview Egypt: characteristics, structure and resources of the sector," http://www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/naso_egypt/en; Zwirn, "Aquaculture in Egypt: Improving food security and resolving resource allocation conflicts," pp. 131-2.

¹⁷⁸ Malm and Esmailian, "Doubly dispossessed by accumulation," p. 414.

¹⁷⁹ Sa'īd Fu'ād and 'Abd al-'Āl Al-Bandārī, "Al-Burullus taht 'qabḍat' māfiyā al-'arāḍī," *Jarīdat Al-*

fingerlings for the ponds in the lake. Bush and Sabri claim that there is an extensive black market in fish fry as the harvesting of wild fry for the use in fish farms is illegal.¹⁸⁰ Yet the practice is widespread, and my informants among the fishermen confirmed that the practice was ongoing.¹⁸¹ Bush and Sabri quote one fisherman who tellingly reveals the compulsion that forces his hand in the matter: "This [capturing of fish fry] is destroying our tomorrow, but my family has to eat today."¹⁸²

A final reason to be critical of the production statistics – or more precisely the yield statistics – is the frequent breaches of the imposed area restrictions. Fish farms require official permits, whereby specified areas of the lake are leased for five-year terms.¹⁸³ Transgressions are normal, and the fish farms are reported to expand far beyond the area included in the permit. In Lake Burullus for example, 130 fish farms have permits for 3000 acres of the lake, yet the farms extend over 18 000 acres.¹⁸⁴ The trend continued after the uprising. The leader of a trade union for fishermen and labourers in Burj al-Burullus claimed that in the first year after the 25th of January uprising, 30 000 further acres of lake had been turned into fish farm ponds.¹⁸⁵ Although the number – which translates to 126 square kilometres, or half the remaining lake – is very high, it is likely that the illegal expansion of the lake after the uprising has continued in a large scale. Every fisherman I talked to mentioned the rapid expansion of the fish farms. In terms of the yield statistics, the illegal expansion means that they are inflated. The actual production area would be larger than the official numbers take into account.

The ability of the industrial fish farms to externalise costs of hatching and growing fish fry, dumping the impoverished and polluted pond water into the lake, and expanding beyond set limits, is an important reason behind the profitability that makes aquaculture such a lucrative investment. These externalities are not part of the image of an industry with impressive growth rates, which the development agencies promote. The aquaculture sector is a market success story to the perceived development problems of Egypt: a nominally private industry that provides cheap food and protein to the impoverished population. The perceived success relates in turn to the standard development problem of Egypt, of a growing

Ta'āwun, 6. November 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Bush and Sabri, "Mining for fish: Privatization of the" commons" along Egypt's Northern coastline," pp. 22-3; Zwirn, "Aquaculture in Egypt: Improving food security and resolving resource allocation conflicts," p. 136.

¹⁸¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayḫ, 24.10.2012

¹⁸² Quoted in Bush and Sabri, "Mining for fish: Privatization of the" commons" along Egypt's Northern coastline," p. 45.

¹⁸³ Zwirn, "Aquaculture in Egypt: Improving food security and resolving resource allocation conflicts," p. 135.

¹⁸⁴ Magda Ghoneim quoted in Malm and Esmailian, "Doubly dispossessed by accumulation," p. 415.

¹⁸⁵ Interview, Burj al-Burullus, 27.10.2012

population “trapped” on a narrow and stagnant strip of fertile land. The production yields of aquaculture are thus “a solution”. Fish has also become a part of the development discourse on food security that frames Egyptian agriculture. Institutionally, fishing interests have been subordinated those of agriculture. The associated state directorate, GAFRD, is an agency organised under the ministry of agriculture. Fishing was historically never an important part of the Egyptian discourse on food security and development. The government is promoting the industry in tandem with USAID, FAO and the World Bank, not least because of the development problems aquaculture purports to solve. Largely left out of the official accounts are the detrimental effects to the lake and the lake life. The Burullus fishermen on the other hand are aware of the state of the lake. One of them summed it up accordingly when I asked him about his expectations for the future: “In 50 years there will be no fishermen; there will be no fish.”¹⁸⁶

Similar to the case of agriculture, behind the development discourse there are social forces and economic interests that benefit from the reforms. There are important reasons connected to the relations of economic and political power that support these policies. Allegations of corruption and collusion at the top of networks between the responsible police and the GAFRD are levelled in the media – and were similarly made by informants among the fishermen.¹⁸⁷ Although some of them complained, the government response had been non-existing. They said it was not possible to petition the government to do anything, as the perpetrators were the same as those tasked with protecting the lake. According to the informants, the fish farm leases are given to influential and connected businessmen, local elites and local government members like judges, police officers and other public officials.¹⁸⁸

This complicity of government officials in the aquaculture industry hampers government efforts to contain the transgressions, as members of the institutions of control have economic interests in the sector. The connections and links between the fish farm owners and members of government organisations, the bureaucracy, as well as security agencies show through the lack of ability – or will – to respond to the complaining fishermen. The story told by fishermen in Lake Burullus corresponds with that of Bush and Sabri on the situation of Lake Manzala. There, a “Manzala mafia” comprised of “government officials,

¹⁸⁶ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

¹⁸⁷ Fu'ād and Al-Bandārī, "Al-Burullus taht "qabḍat" māfiyā al-'arāḍi." Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012; Burj al-Burullus 27.10.2012

¹⁸⁸ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012; 30.11.2014; similar problems were reported with the land reclamation projects, influential groups used position and wealth to accrue ownership of the reclaimed lands in the area, although they were supposed to benefit landless farmers and the fishermen who lost access to the lake, interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 25.10.2012; see also *ibid*.

bureaucrats and local elites” controlled the fish farms.¹⁸⁹ One informant summarised the situation well when I asked him about the owners of the fish farms: “We cannot complain to the government about the owners [of the fish farms] because the government are working together with them. [...] They [the owners] are the government.”¹⁹⁰

The fisherman’s words emphasise the complicity between private interests and public policy in a way that resembles the agriculture reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. The private interests have an ability to use the language of the reforms in shaping public policies. Thus, while aquaculture is promoted because it creates jobs, economic growth and contributes to Egypt’s food security, in economic terms, the sector transfers the surpluses of lake fishing from the commons to private ownership of elites. Fishermen are turned from self-employed to low-cost labour in the fish farms or forced to join the cadre of the rural unemployed. The spoils of growth go to the fish farms’ owners, and the increased fish production and consumption increases do not benefit the impoverished and unemployed former fishermen. The policies are pursued not because of an established rural class controlling the government apparatus, although it is also able to influence decisions. It is likely that government officials use their position to accrue the resources to join the privileged class. When viewed as a social structure, however, the promotion and expansion of the aquaculture industry in the lakes has benefitted an influential local upper class.

The state, with the aid and assistance of international financial and development agencies, has promoted economic reforms in the fishing and agriculture sectors – reforms that were justified by reference to “development”. In both sectors the reform projects have served the interests of the rural upper class and landowners. The overlap in membership between the rural upper class and government institutions, which are influential in the implementation of these interests, is an important reason for the complicity between policy and class interests. In the nexus of class and state power, the concrete directions of rural development is shaped by the hegemony of the state and social institutions of the rural upper class, be it merchants or landowners. An important part of this hegemony is the ability to control the everyday behaviour of the subaltern classes.

¹⁸⁹ Bush and Sabri, "Mining for fish: Privatization of the" commons" along Egypt's Northern coastline," p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

4 “What did the revolution do?” Political mobilisation in the countryside

The relationship between social forces and government institutions discussed in the previous chapter also raises questions about the acts of resistance and the ability of subaltern groups to organise and resist. In Egypt, there is a long tradition for popular uprisings. Diyāb, for example, argues that Egypt’s history is primarily one of repeated insurrections and revolutions.¹⁹¹ It is easy to become blinded by the large, city-based insurrections where the insurgents can be portrayed as a unified category of “the people” or “the nation”. This perspective underestimates the other daily struggles, such as labour strikes, smaller demonstrations, or local protests. In the countryside, these limited forms of political mobilisation are by far the most common. Yet they stand in a particular relationship to hegemony, and their form and content can be made to reveal how hegemony works.

The forms of political mobilisation in the villages vary from simple protests to petitions, court complaints, to sit-ins, and blocking roads and railway lines and disrupt official services. There are also historically other more violent forms that are broadly conceivable political mobilisation. Nathan Brown and Sayyid ‘Ašmāwī extensively discuss for example theft and murder.¹⁹² There are also more economic tools, like setting fire to cotton harvests. In the following I discuss the overt forms of political mobilisation where the content of the protests are available. I look at forms of mobilisation before and after the 25th of January uprising. I start with the protests that Law 96 of 1992 triggered. Protests against that law marked a shift in the relationship between the state and farmers, and saw the return to large-scale mobilisation against the government. I then trace these protests into the post-uprising political situation, before I relate them to a novel form of mobilisation in the countryside: the dissemination of trade unions. The way the trade unions spread and function reveals how political mobilisation in the countryside connects and disconnects with power struggles at the centre.

¹⁹¹ Diyāb, *Intifādāt am Tawrāt fī Tārīk Miṣr al-Ḥadīṯ*, 20.

¹⁹² ‘Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*; Brown, *Peasant politics in modern Egypt : the struggle against the state*.

4.1 (Re)claiming the land 1: Law 96 of 1992

Law 96 of 1992 was the culmination of the process of market reform in the countryside and the final piece of the reversal of the land reforms of the 1950s and 1960s. It also engendered the largest mobilisation of farmers since the events in the sixties, and the ASU-led mobilisation effort at that time. The events of Kamšiš in the mid-1960s, and elsewhere, point to an extensive mobilisation in the countryside. The retraditionalisation strategy that was the state's answer, sought to quiet and control the political aspirations of radical groups, leftist organisations during the seventies and Islamist groups in the eighties and nineties.

In 1990 Springborg identified four factors behind the success of the state strategy to bring about political quiescence.¹⁹³ Firstly, and most importantly, from the very top there was an interest in stability and demobilisation of society. Hosni Mubarak assumed the presidency consciously seeking to depoliticise the population, as Sadat had sought before him. The reorganisation of ASU as the National Democratic Party included the removal of the party's mobilising potential. Other parastatal institutions like the cooperatives and the PBDAC that had enabled the state apparatus to intrude in rural society, were kept functional. The disciplinary power of these institutions eased the control and regulation of farmers in particular and the countryside in general. Secondly, the rural bourgeoisie, the primary constituency of the regime alongside the capitalist landowners, controlled local politics. The relationship with the rural upper class is maintained through patron-client relationships, Springborg argues.¹⁹⁴

Thirdly, Springborg emphasises the continuing albeit limited state support for the poorer segments of society through food and energy subsidies along with public employment opportunities. By the early 1980s, 31 percent of rural non-agricultural male employment was within the state apparatus. This share only increased, and by the beginning of the 2000s, Adams reported it to be between 40 and 50 percent.¹⁹⁵ This led to inflated government work rolls; there are more workers than there is work. Although badly paid and routine, it is still attractive work because of the benefits like health insurance and social recognition. Samuli Schielke gives one example of the consequence of the inflated work rolls:

Tawfiq has a government job [...] as a health inspector [...]. Every day he goes to the same

¹⁹³ Springborg, "Agrarian Bourgeoisie, Semiproletarians, and the Egyptian State: Lessons for Liberalization," pp. 464-6.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Richard H Adams Jr, "Nonfarm Income, Inequality, and Land in Rural Egypt*," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 50, no. 2 (2002): pp. 348-50; Steven Haggblade, Peter Hazell, and Thomas Reardon, "The rural non-farm economy: prospects for growth and poverty reduction," *World Development* 38, no. 10 (2010): p. 1431.

state-subsidised bakery where he, with two other inspectors, writes 'condition: normal' into the inspection book and signs his name, whatever the real condition of the bakery may be.¹⁹⁶

The pointlessness of the task Tawfiq is set to do illustrates another problem: the meaninglessness of available jobs – if there are at all available jobs, which adds to the frustration among the rural youth.¹⁹⁷ It is as if the state further expanded the work rolls to partially make up for the 700 000 jobs lost in the countryside due to the market reforms.

The protests of the farmers and in particular the tenant farmers who were targeted by the Law 96 revealed the fourth strategy of the state, its willingness to employ coercion. As Bush has argued extensively, however, violence was endemic in the countryside under and after the reforms.¹⁹⁸ This violence was often directed by the state or by landowners with the knowing complicity of state institutions. During the nineties, the regime's use of violence took place in the context of a low-level civil war with militant Islamists. A large presence of security forces would also prevent protests. Beyond this, it is possible that the existence of the militant Islamist insurgency made overt political opposition suspect in the eyes of the regime and its supporters. For example, the government was quick to blame Islamists when tenant farmers tried to resist the effects of Law 96.¹⁹⁹ In such a climate, it is more formidable for dissatisfied groups to mobilise for political protests. Hence, the quiescence of the rural population cannot be confused with political apathy or belief in the government's rhetoric. Rather the quiescence refers to the absence of overt protests, in other words behavioural conformity.

Despite the combination of local control, patronage and (limited) support for the rural poor, protests seemed to materialise when economic interests and public policies directly challenged people's livelihoods. Thus, tenant farmers protested all over Egypt when Law 96 entered into force on 1st of October 1997. These protests started peacefully, by complaints and letters to newspapers, but they escalated to demonstration marches and strikes before they turned to counter violence when farmers responded to landowners who sought to take over farmland.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Samuli Schielke, "Boredom and despair in rural Egypt," *Contemporary Islam* 2, no. 3 (2008): p. 255.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁹⁸ Ray Bush, "Market Violence in Egypt's Countryside," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 19, no. 1 (2007); Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt."; Ray Bush and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, *Civil Society and the Uncivil State: Land Tenure Reform in Egypt and the Crisis of Rural Livelihoods* (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2004).

¹⁹⁹ Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt," p. 1607.

²⁰⁰ 'Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*: p. 225.

Law 96 removed the secure tenancy that tenants had enjoyed since Law 52 of 1966, which modified the original land reform laws. Tenancy rights were extended from three years to indefinite, and tenants could be evicted only in the case of non-payment of rent, fixed at seven times the land tax in the 1952 laws. The first part of the act raised the rent on land to 22 times the land tax. With the full implementation in 1997, rent ceilings were removed altogether causing immediate rent increases, which sometimes reached 400 percent.²⁰¹ For example, Ray Bush reports that in the village of “Dandeet” in Daqahlīya, rents went from 600 Egyptian pounds to 4800 in ten years.²⁰²

Both the government and the opposition expected large protests with the law’s full implementation on 1st of October. This was partly caused by the protests preceding the implementation as tenants became aware of the law, and the government’s intention to implement it despite the breach of “the social contract” it implied.²⁰³ The Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR) documented 32 deaths, 751 injuries and 2410 arrests in acts opposing the law from 1st of January 1997 until 1st of May 1998.²⁰⁴ And although the expected protests never materialised, from January 1998 until December 2000, the same centre recorded figures showing a continuation of the violence: 119 deaths, 846 injuries and 1409 arrests from January 1998 until December 2000.²⁰⁵ The large police presence in the governorates at the time – in expectation of conflict – contributed to the limitation of protests.²⁰⁶

The protests against the law started before its implementation primarily because of two reasons. Firstly, the PBDAC implemented the law by arranging to seize the harvests of farmers who owed debts to the bank, fearing that they would either run away without paying their debts or losing their land. The very first protest against the law occurred, according to ‘Ašmāwī, in Nāšir in Banī Suwayf as 3000 tenant farmers staged a demonstration after the bank announced its measure.²⁰⁷ Secondly, the agricultural cooperatives started to transfer ownership deeds from the tenants to the owners, making the tenants ineligible for the cooperatives’ services. Simultaneously, many “owners” hastened to sell their lands without agreeing with the tenants.²⁰⁸ These spurred the first protests and forced the government to make some concessions, and letting tenants on state owned lands stay.

²⁰¹ Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt," p. 1606.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," pp. 115-6.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁰⁵ Land Centre for Human Rights, "Farmer Struggles against Law 96 of 1992," p. 127.

²⁰⁶ Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," p. 120.

²⁰⁷ ‘Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*: p. 228.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 229.

Some of the opposition parties also got involved in the protests. The Tajammu‘ party, for instance, organised demonstrations in Cairo and Daqahlīya. However, state security prevented them from holding meetings and organising protests in the countryside. Ḥamdīn Ṣabāhī, for example, was arrested during this period. Another attempt to protest was a petition opposing the law that had collected 350 000 signatures. Former minister of agriculture Yūsuf Wālī rejected the petition, however, because he did not believe that so many could oppose the law.²⁰⁹ This is despite estimates that the law affected almost one million tenants and their families.²¹⁰ The rhetorical incredulity against the level of opposition stands in contrast to the government’s official response. Alongside the security presence, the government established reconciliation committees that were supposed to mediate in conflicts between tenants and landowners. The high success rate of the committees, over 95 percent, was reported in the state media. Some of the success rate of the committees owed to the wealthier tenants, who were able to buy the land, or owned other plots of lands, and thus “broke the lines”.²¹¹ However, Saad reports instances where the police accompanied the landowners in the committees, and tenants were forced to sign under threat of torture.²¹²

4.2 (Re)claiming the land 2: state, market, violence

The most prominent feature of the post-Law 96 protests is the collusion between landowners and the state’s security apparatus. This went beyond the reconciliation committees and extended to the concrete actions on the ground. A symbolic example of the times was the following event in Kamšīš. The village known for its revolutionary proclivities saw the return of the old landowning Fiqī family. Members of the Fiqī family returned to (re)claim lands given to the farmers under the agrarian reform laws.²¹³ A press release from the LCHR provides the story with details:

[...] in the evening, Sunday 12th of September 1998 the Al-Fiqī family used threats and intimidation against the farmers of Kamšīš, and then sought to use their influence within the Ministry of Interior. After exhausting [those] methods, they resorted to vandalism, road blocking, and hired thugs to push farmers off the land by force.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Bush, "Politics, power and poverty: twenty years of agricultural reform and market liberalisation in Egypt," p. 1606.

²¹⁰ Springborg, "State-Society Relations in Egypt: the debate over owner-tenant relations," p. 235.

²¹¹ ‘Ašmāwī, *Al-Fallāḥūn wa-al-Sulṭa*: p. 246.

²¹² Saad, "Egyptian politics and the Tenancy Law," p. 120; see also Land Centre for Human Rights, "Farmer Struggles against Law 96 of 1992," p. 134.

²¹³ See Fatemah Farag, "Kamshish: Take Two," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 397, 1. October 1998, p. 3; Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, spies, and statesmen : Egypt's road to revolt* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2012). p. 68; Land Centre for Human Rights, "Aḥdāt qaryat Kamšīš musalsal al-'unf fī-l-rīf al-miṣrī," (Cairo 1999).

²¹⁴ Land Centre for Human Rights, "Aḥdāt qaryat Kamšīš musalsal al-'unf fī-l-rīf al-miṣrī." (My translation).

Through the press release it becomes clear that the family had first sought to obtain a court ruling in their favour. “The Fiqī-family hired the thugs and went to Kamšīš land located in the Zimām of Baḳātā and demolished animal shelters, filled canals and drainage ditches, and opened fire on the farmers.”²¹⁵ When the farmers responded and, according to the press release, surrounded and chased the thugs, some of the Fiqī family members were able to get the police to arrest 16 of them. They were later charged on account of possession of illegal weapons, which the press release said they captured from the Fiqī family’s thugs, although these charges were eventually dropped.

The Fiqī family did not have legal title to the land in question. The land was subject to a legal dispute and therefore a caretaker was appointed at the time.²¹⁶ The struggle continued in 1999 as the Fiqī family obtained an administrative order from the governorate forcing 900 tenant farmers from around 2000 acres of land, according to another LCHR press release, which led to renewed clashes between security officers and farmers.²¹⁷ The ability of rich and powerful families like the Fiqī family to exploit the security apparatus for its purposes is commonplace in the countryside. Throughout the events, police and security forces locally, as well as administration at the governorate level were involved on the landowners’ side.

The incidents reveal an additional feature of the violence in the countryside; the use of thugs in the guise of private security as a corollary to state employed force. Numerous other reports also mention private security operating close to the logic of armed gang that the police leaves unchecked are another form of this collusion. Bush and Sabry reported fishermen who complained that armed gangs were patrolling the fish farms on lake Manzala.²¹⁸ And during interviews, fishermen on the Burullus echoed this concern after the revolution. They claimed the situation had only grown worse as the police force had completely retreated leaving the lake to its own devices.²¹⁹

The collaboration of the police with the landowners to implement the law went beyond quelling demonstrations and supporting landowners in confrontations. The LCHR separates between eight types of conflict in rural Egypt: “Some of these correlated strongly with consequences of the implementation of law 96, other disputes were linked with the

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Land Centre for Human Rights, “Fallāḩū Kamšīš yuwājihūna maḳāṭir al-balṭaja wa-l-qabḍ al-’ašwa’i,” (Cairo 1999).

²¹⁸ Bush and Sabri, “Mining for fish: Privatization of the” commons” along Egypt’s Northern coastline,” p. 23.

²¹⁹ Interview, Burj al-Burullus, 27.10.2012

deterioration of rural Egypt's economic and social situation [...]."²²⁰ Expulsion of tenants, contesting land ownership, disputes over *awqāf* land, agrarian reform lands, alluvial land, dwellings on farmlands, and boundaries and irrigation caused incidents – violent or otherwise – that the centre recoded. And although violence did not always manifest as clashes or protests, expelling tenant farmers from their lands and dispossessing them of livelihoods is also a form of violence.

I want to mention one other incident from the examples of conflict listed above. Law 96 pertained only to land that was rented. Land that had been redistributed under the agrarian reform laws – meaning confiscated by the state and sold to farmers – was not included. One such case, however, where law 96 was used to mislead the farmers, is noticeable due to its links with the state. Specifically it involved 75,25 acres of land that had been confiscated from Amīn Wālī, the grandfather of the then minister of agriculture, Yūsuf Wālī. Members of his family sought the land back, despite that the farmers who had received the land – originally 52 farmers who received 1,19 acre each – had initiated the procedure to purchase the land. The Agrarian Reform Authority had neglected the farmers' claims. They appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, but Wālī family members and local police started to "terrorise" the farmers in an effort to force them to leave the land before the court's verdict.²²¹

Another example of the contestation over land as a resource is the fishermen's protests against the land reclamation projects of the southwestern part of Lake Burullus. Both in the 1980s and again in 1998/9, the government cut off and dried out parts of the lake.²²² As a consequence, the water table of the lake and the surrounding canals are higher than the bordering fields. The effects are also visible on maps where Lake Burullus' western edge is completely straight. For the fishermen, it meant that the lake became more difficult to access. While the village in the beginning of the 1900s had been located on the edge of the lake, by the 2000s the lake was a 10-15 minutes drive away on bad roads. During the land reclamation projects, the fishermen had protested vocally, organising marches to the district centre and trying to stop the work on the damming of the lake. State security had responded violently against these protests. At one point during the conflict in 1998 they had set up a detention

²²⁰ Land Centre for Human Rights, "Farmer Struggles against Law 96 of 1992," p. 131.

²²¹ Ibid., p. 128, 34-5.

²²² Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 25.10.2012; 29.11.2012

facility outside the village to be able to stop the protesters. An informant told me that several of the fishermen had been detained and many beaten or otherwise threatened.²²³

The state simultaneously promised the affected fishermen right of first refusal on stocks on the land in the reclaimed lands. Some fishermen accepted this offer, but most refused to buy any land. The problem was that most of the land ended in the same hands that later came to control the fish farms, namely government employees at various levels. Springborg uncovered that the method the government used was a program established under Sadat that assigns land to agricultural “graduates.” However, “[s]urveys of property owners in reclaimed areas that have been sold to “graduates” on highly concessional terms reveal these owners to be exclusively government employees.”²²⁴ In interviews, the fishermen reported that some of the reclaimed lands closest to the lakeshore are being turned back into “lake”, meaning fish farms because of the profitability of aquaculture.²²⁵

The different local conflicts reveal the wider project which the Egyptian countryside was subjected to, and of which law 96 was a part. More than just reversing the land reforms of the Free Officers, it reflected the potential value of the land on the market, which had increased significantly. Ray Bush quotes land price increases from 50 000 to 250 000 and 300 000 Egyptian pounds per acre between 1997 and 2007. This came on top of considerable price increases during the 1980s, which can be considered part of the motive. Springborg reports the average price of state land in 1986 to 12 000 pounds per acre.²²⁶ In the Kafr al-Šayk village, the price was said to be 300 000 pounds per acre, though sometimes more.²²⁷

The increases in the “market price” of land formed the economic incentives behind the reversal of the land reform laws. The reforms of the agricultural sector were the precondition to “realise” the, until then, hypothetical profits. Behind the reforms was a situation where the state saw its interests align with the economic interests of the rural bourgeoisie and the old landowning class rather than those of the rural poor. Unrest had initially forced the government to a partial retreat, and not to implement law 96 in state lands. By the year 2000 the scales had changed, and the ministry of agriculture completed the liberation of “the market in land” and reversed its previous decision. The ministry dismissed

²²³ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 25.10.2012; 29.11.2012

²²⁴ Springborg, “Agrarian Bourgeoisie, Semiproletarians, and the Egyptian State: Lessons for Liberalization,” p. 465.

²²⁵ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 29.11.2012

²²⁶ Springborg, “State-Society Relations in Egypt: the debate over owner-tenant relations,” p. 234, n. 9.

²²⁷ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 30.11.2012

the tenancy agreements with farmers on state owned lands, thus the government dispossessed an additional 15 000 tenants of their lands and hence their livelihoods.²²⁸

The market reforms of the previous two decades have altered the Egyptian countryside. Portraying the market as opposed to the state – as in the classical economic edict that a free market must be liberated from undue state influence – misses how the market reforms of the agricultural sector represent a reorganisation of the method of distributing spoils. This holds true whether it is the market for land or the market for fertiliser. The “market” has become a trope for an economic system to distribute wealth from the poor to the rural bourgeoisie and the landowning class.²²⁹ Similar thinking about the desirability of markets permeated the government.²³⁰ The real object of the market reforms was not the state, but society. And in order to complete the transformation, the coercive apparatus of the state along with “private security” forcefully controlled and limited opposition and dissent. An important element in the coercive strategy was limiting the localised areas, and prevent wider organisation that could mobilise and direct the popular discontent.

4.3 (Re)claiming the land 3: “Second phase of the Egyptian revolution”²³¹

Despite the apparent success of the regime’s coercive strategy, conflicts continued in the countryside after 2000. In January 2007, Ray Bush reports 7 deaths and 54 injuries caused by conflicts over landholdings. And in March that year, he mentions a sit-in in the town of Dikirnis in Daqahlīya where farmers protested against the heir of a landowning family attempting to reclaim holdings of fifty families who had legally purchased the land.²³² Rural protests occurred also in instances when they were not directly related to issues over land. For example, the people of the fishing village Burj al-Burullus blocked the international coastal highway in 2008 for seven hours. They were protesting the decision of the governor of Kafr al-Šayk to halt flour deliveries.²³³

In the two years before the revolution, activity in the countryside continued at a stable level. Ray Bush reports 80 and 91 sit-ins, and 66 and 75 demonstrations, in 2009 and 2010

²²⁸ Land Centre for Human Rights, “Farmer Struggles against Law 96 of 1992,” p. 135.

²²⁹ Ray Bush, “Coalitions for dispossession and networks of resistance? Land, politics and agrarian reform in Egypt,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011): p. 397; Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: p. 242; passim; Shokr, “Reflections on Two Revolutions.”

²³⁰ Ray Bush, “When” Enough” is not Enough,” in *Political and Social Protest in Egypt*, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009), p. 91.

²³¹ Basheer Sakr to Tadamon, 2011, 18. March, <http://tadamon.katib.org/2011/03/20/how-did-the-egyptian-farmers-start-the-second-phase-of-the-egyptian-revolution/>.

²³² Bush, “When” Enough” is not Enough,” p. 92.

²³³ El-Ghobashy, “The praxis of the Egyptian revolution.”

respectively. Another indication is the numbers of those arrested, as they directly relate to the security effort of the state. According to Bush, in 2009 there were 1333 arrests, while 1687 were arrested in 2010.²³⁴ It is difficult to gauge the trends based on statistics of two years, but compared to the beginning of that decade – 1409 arrests total in 1998 and 1999 – the numbers are increasing. Similarly, the amount of deaths and injuries in events in the countryside rose from 192 deaths and 1066 injuries to 297 deaths and 1451 injuries between 2009 and 2010, which supports the hypothesis that levels of rural unrest were increasing. The problem is that these statistics do not tell if the increases are due to protests spreading or if regime repression was intensifying. Either way, the numbers reflect a restive countryside.

After the uprising on 25th of January, some farmers took advantage of the political situation to reclaim some of their losses. Basheer Sakr of the Peasant Solidarity Committee documented several cases where farmers used the post-uprising political situation to take action. In villages in the Buḥayra province and the Daqahlīya governorate, farmers used the atmosphere to seize lands that government employees or relatives of old landowning families had acquired the previous decade. One example is the farmers in Ma‘mūra east of Alexandria who seized 66 acres sold by the *Awqāf*-authority in 2008 to a group of judges and police officers.²³⁵ There were other examples of similar events. In Daqahlīya an estimated 10 000 farmers from different villages participated in a demonstration in front of the governor’s office in Manṣūra.²³⁶

There were other kinds of rural conflicts not as directly connected to the farmers’ struggle as such. However, they were a different manifestation of the neglect of the countryside. A telling example is the villagers of Taḥsīn in the Daqahlīya province. The villagers declared the village “administratively autonomous” on the 22nd of September 2012.²³⁷ They protested against the lack of basic government services like roads, electricity and waste management. The villagers had been protesting since 2008, including several instances of civil disobedience, hunger strikes and keeping their children out of school.²³⁸ Their efforts had failed to get any response from the governorate. When the situation

²³⁴ All numbers from Bush, "Coalitions for dispossession and networks of resistance? Land, politics and agrarian reform in Egypt," p. 400.

²³⁵ Baṣīr Ṣaqr to Tadamon, 6. March 2011, <http://tadamon.katib.org/2011/03/>.

²³⁶ Baṣīr Ṣaqr to Tadamon, 1. March 2011, <http://tadamon.katib.org/2011/03/>.

²³⁷ Ġāda Abd al-Hāfīz, "Qaryat ‘al-infiṣāl al-idārī’ fī-l-Daqahlīya: al-ahālī qarrarū mana‘ al-mas’ūlīn min al-dukhūl," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 24. September 2012; Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, "'tamma faṣalnā... fa-infaṣalnā': sukkān al-Taḥsīn wa-ḡayruhum min qurā Miṣr al-muhammiša," (Cairo: Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, 2012).

²³⁸ Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, "'tamma faṣalnā... fa-infaṣalnā': sukkān al-Taḥsīn wa-ḡayruhum min qurā Miṣr al-muhammiša," p. 3-6.

continued after the 25th of January uprising, the solution was to declare the village “administratively autonomous” from the governorate in an attempt to gain national attention for their cause: to get a proper road that would ease transport to and from the village.²³⁹

There are no statistics on rural unrest. An overview for 2012 by the ECESR points to a significant increase in the frequency of protests, but does not disaggregate the statistics except on governorate level.²⁴⁰ Generally, protests occurred in all of the governorates, but the cities of Cairo and Alexandria have the largest share along with the Delta governorate of Ġarbīya. Ġarbīya includes the cities of Ṭaṇṭa and Al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā, famous for its labour activism, which explains the large number of protests there. Outside of that, the highest frequency of protests in the Delta occurred in Šarqīya, Daqahlīya and Kafr al-Šayḳ, but the report does not specify how many were “rural” in origin.²⁴¹ It is thus hard to say if there was a wider mobilisation in the countryside or if incidents like the ones above were limited to a few instances.

One trend that emerges from the above examples is the roots of the post-uprising protests in the pre-uprising events. Dispossession of land at the hands of groups linked to the state and marginalisation of local communities were the underlying causes. Another feature is the failure to link to other similar social and political protest movements. The rural protests discussed above remained local in scope and outlook, and rarely aimed to organise beyond ad hoc networks. Though Bush promotes the strength of the “fluidity” of these networks, I would like to point out the corollary weakness of fragility.²⁴² The willingness of the state and its social allies to use force in the countryside meant they disrupted attempts at wider organisation and mobilisation, and conflicts were resolved in violent standoffs.

4.4 The spread of labour unions

Independent trade unions became a widely used method of political mobilisation after the 25th of January uprising to overcome the pressure against organisation, in the cities as well as in the countryside. Unionisation was traditionally regulated and limited to one official syndicate for each sector, but on the 12th of March 2011 the “Declaration on Trade Union Freedom” by the then minister of labour power, Aḥmad al-Bura‘ī, enabled the formation and

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁴⁰ Ilhāmī Al-Mīrḡanī et al., “Al-Iḥtijājāt al-‘Ummālīya fī Mišr 2012,” ed. Ilhāmī Al-Mīrḡanī (Cairo: Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, 2013).

²⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

²⁴² Bush, “Coalitions for dispossession and networks of resistance? Land, politics and agrarian reform in Egypt,” p. 401.

registration of independent trade unions. The declaration was supposed to be succeeded by a legal amendment, but that law has never been passed. According to a lawyer in the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), the declaration had been sufficient in the post-uprising political climate to successfully register independent syndicates.²⁴³ Another lawyer, from the Land Centre for Human Rights (LCHR), corroborated the story of the ECESR informant: "It is not a problem to register new syndicates. They [the bureaucrats] are all afraid of us now."²⁴⁴ By November 2012 the ECESR alone had provided legal assistance to approximately 120 unions to register, in almost all sectors, including agriculture and fishing. The lawyer further estimated that around 300 independent unions had emerged after the uprising.

In the countryside, more than 80 different farmers' unions appeared within the first two years.²⁴⁵ The multiplicity of farmers' unions reflects the dividing lines that separate them, and the difference in reaching out on a national level. Of the more than 80 farmers' unions, four have managed to established a presence at the national level and across a majority of the governorates. All of these four have in common, however, that they are tied to different political forces. These linkages are also clear in the spread and mobilisation efforts of the farmers.

One of the four syndicates, the Union of Small Farmers' Syndicates (USFS), is an umbrella organisation for local unions tied to the network of the Land Centre for Human Rights.²⁴⁶ The union has member syndicates in 16 of the governorates. One activist told me that they had started organising the syndicates aimed for farmers with holdings of less than five acres, shortly after the revolution. He had been to 15 governorates to assist in establishing local syndicates there.²⁴⁷ Another LCHR representative asserted that they had chosen a decentralised model because even though the farmers' struggles are connected, the problems manifest differently locally between for example "Fayyūm and Kafr al-Šayk".²⁴⁸ Members of the LCHR were still heavily involved in the USFS, and it builds on the centre's national network that they have acquired since their start in 1997. Thus it primarily connects farmers who have previously been involved in rural conflicts. One example is the branch

²⁴³ Interview, Cairo, 8.11.2012

²⁴⁴ Interview, Cairo, 13.11.2012

²⁴⁵ Mohamed H. A. Nawar and Tahani Abdel-Hakim, "Current Status and Prospective of Farmers' Unions and Syndicates in Egypt," in *Watch Letter no 26* (International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies, 2013), p. 20.

²⁴⁶ Ittihad Niqābāt Siḡār al-Muzārī'in.

²⁴⁷ Interview, Daqahlīya, 26.11.2012

²⁴⁸ Interview, Cairo, 13.11.2012

organised in collaboration with the local farmers' union in Qūta Qārūn in Fayyūm. These are the farmers who were involved in a struggle over land rights with the Wali family, relatives of the previous minister of agriculture Yūsuf Wālī. The family used the land reforms and its influence within the governorate administration and the ministry of agriculture to try to reclaim land distributed under the land reforms. The farmers supported by the LCHR were struggling to hold on to the land. The unionisation of these farmers was then a direct extension of the farmers' struggle in the area.

As mentioned, there were also three other unions, all of which relied on political forces from which they appeared. The General Syndicate of Farmers (GSF) was started by veteran activist Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir.²⁴⁹ He was also the leader of the union until his death in September 2013, after a internecine struggle, Usāma al-Jaḥaš was appointed the leader by then minister of manpower, Kamāl Abū 'Ayṭa. Two factions were involved in the struggle for leadership. One faction was centered on Usāma al-Jaḥaš and Rif'at Jūda Dāḡir while the other on Muḥammad al-'Aqārī. The appointment of Usāma al-Jaḥaš at the hands of the ministry settled the conflict – at least for the time being.²⁵⁰

The GSF was nominally established on the 11th of April 2011, shortly after the revolution. Founder and former leader Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir had been trying to establish a farmers' syndicate since 1996. Before the revolution, however, he faced opposition from the state bureaucracy: "I went to Mr. Ṣafwat al-Šarīf in 1996 and he ripped up the application and threw it in my face. After that I went to Mrs. 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Hādi, the minister of labour, but she mocked me and said 'it would be better for you to electrocute yourself.'"²⁵¹ 'Abd al-Qādir's history of political involvement under the old regime is symptomatic for the GSF, as its leadership on governorate and branch level is largely built on networks formed during political work before the uprising, for example involvement in village boards or the cooperatives' union.

The third large farmers' union is the General Syndicate of Egypt's Farmers (GSEF). It was established formally on the 5th of August 2011, and 'Abd al-Raḥman Šukrī, a member of parliament from the Freedom and Justice Party, is the leader.²⁵² The syndicate draws most of its leadership from different professions, although these are also involved in farming

²⁴⁹ Al-Niqāba al-'Āmma li-l-Fallāḥīn. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir died in a traffic accident on the 21. of September 2013.

²⁵⁰ Ahmad Abd al-Kāliq, "'Al-Quwā al-'Āmila' tuṭṭih bi- 'rajab' min niqābat al-fallāḥīn li-Šāliḥ 'al-Jaḥaš'," *Al-Bawāba Nyūz*, 11. December 2012.

²⁵¹ Quoted in Yehia "Revolutionary farming."

²⁵² Al-Niqāba al-'Āmma li-Fallāḥī Miṣr.

enterprises on the side.²⁵³ The GSEF relies on the networks of the Muslim Brotherhood for support and recruitment, which has led competing unions to complain that it is just an organisation for the Brotherhood. Šukrī acknowledged the backing of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party in an interview, but he denied that all members are also members of the Brotherhood.²⁵⁴ However, the union's obscurity after the coup d'état on the 3rd of July 2013 suggests it was close. If not all members were Muslim Brothers, its key leaders were, enough to be rendered inoperable with the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The fourth large farmers' union is the Union of Egyptian Farmers (UEF), led until recently by 'Abd al-Majīd al-Ḳūlī.²⁵⁵ It was registered on the 30th of April 2011 – the anniversary of Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn's murder – although it had been under planning since 1983.²⁵⁶ On the 30th of April 1983, an assembly of 316 farmers from fifteen governorates gathered in Kamšīš, but state security had obstructed the registration ever since.²⁵⁷ The UEF was started by a group of farmers tied to the leftist party of Tajammu' Party, prominent among them Šāhinda Maqlad, the widow after Ṣalāḥ Ḥusayn. The historical reasons for this relation trace back to the socialist ideology that came to dominate the struggle against the Fiqī family in the fifties and sixties.

The UEF and the USFS were both linked directly to the past of the farmers' struggle, while the other two syndicates grew out of established political networks and movements. For example the UEF held its inaugural meeting in Kamšīš, symbolic of its claims to legitimacy, but also suggestive of the network to which it belonged. The USFS drew on its linkages with the LCHR and the struggles against law 96. All of the syndicates tried, to varying degrees, to draw the political legitimacy of the farmers' struggles. However, their most defining feature was the networks to which they were tied.

4.5 Trappings of power: politicisation from above

Two of the above unions were active in the Kafr al-Šayḵ village, where I did fieldwork. There was a local branch of the GSF organised by one of the villagers, as well as a branch of

²⁵³ Nawar and Abdel-Hakim, "Current Status and Prospective of Farmers' Unions and Syndicates in Egypt," p. 19.

²⁵⁴ Ša'bān Našār, "Naqīb al-Fallāḥīn 'Abd al-Rahman Shukrī: al-Fallāḥūn kiyān kabīr yaḥtājūna li-man yudāfī 'u 'an mashākilihim," *Jarīdat al-Ta'āwun*, 26. March 2013.

²⁵⁵ 'Abd al-Majīd al-Ḳūlī also died in a traffic accident, on the 3. of March 2014.

²⁵⁶ Ittiḥād al-fallāḥīn al-miṣrīyīn, see [URL]: <http://www.fallaheen.com>.

²⁵⁷ Karem Yehia, "Revolutionary Farming: Kamshish breathe in freedom and creates a farmers' union," *Al-Ahram*, 9. May 2011.

GSEF organised from a nearby town that had recruited members in the village. The local leader of the GSF had worked since the spring of 2011 in order to establish it. He had heard that a friend of his had set up a branch in the governorate of Kafr al-Šayk. He contacted this friend and proceeded to establish a local unit of the trade union through mobilising his network: “When I sought to establish the syndicate [branch], I told my friends and acquaintances that were farmers, I made pamphlets and posters and distributed and I announced the syndicate from the mosque.” He claimed that by October 2012, the union had 74 members, out of approximately 2000 farmers in the village, and that it was steadily increasing. A year and a half after starting to recruit members for the local branch, he still considered it to be in the “stage of establishment.”²⁵⁸

The presence of the GSEF in the village created considerable confusion for many farmers.²⁵⁹ An old farmer, for example, asserted that he was a member of both syndicates. He knew of the local GSF leader and stressed that he was a member of his organisation. The two membership cards he showed were, however, both issued by GSEF. Two men the old farmer identified as members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who did not come from the village but a nearby town, had recruited him while he was working in the field. They had asked all the peasants in the area to join their union, the GSEF. He had thought at the time that a farmers’ trade union was a good idea, so he had paid a fee of thirty Egyptian pounds to become a member. By December he was dissatisfied with the unions and he had decided he did not wish to renew his membership. He said it was because “nothing had happened.”²⁶⁰ Other farmers were not members at all. His neighbour, for example, a middle-aged farmer, had refused to join the syndicate. His refusal was grounded in a general misgiving about the syndicates: he did not think syndicates would be able to change the situation for farmers.²⁶¹

While the farmers above appeared not to differentiate between the two syndicates, other farmers did. They were suspicious of the GSEF, and accused it of being a Muslim Brotherhood ruse to control the farmers. The GSF branch leader was among those that were aware of the political affiliations of the GSEF. According to him, the Brotherhood had established the syndicate because they failed to take control over the GSF after the revolution. The branch leader, on the other hand, claimed that GSF was politically “independent”: “We don’t want to align the syndicate with any political group or

²⁵⁸ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 29.10.2012; 30.11.2012

²⁵⁹ The similarity created confusion among others as well, one informant told me that the GSF was the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood; interview, Cairo, 13.11.2012.

²⁶⁰ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

²⁶¹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

movement... we care only for our goal: concern for farmers' conditions."²⁶² And though it is true that the GSF has not committed to a political party, the leadership is tied to the pre-uprising political networks on which the state relied. One of the lawyers I interviewed straightforwardly called it a "governmental" trade union.²⁶³

On the local level the links with the unions shows reliance on the traditional rural hierarchy. The GSF branch leader had met his contacts in the syndicate through a position in the agricultural cooperative where he had previously sat on the board. He claimed that the other board members had prevented him from being re-elected after a feud, because they realised he wanted to defend farmers' rights, while they wanted the corruption to continue.²⁶⁴ The GSF branch leader's landholdings and past membership of the agricultural cooperative board, as well as his political affiliation to the Wafd party, identify him as member of the rural middle class. Locally the GSF seems tied to the same rural classes that have dominated the agricultural cooperative societies and village banks since their establishment.

On a national level it is clear that the affiliation to the state's order affords the GSF resources and opportunities for influence that are not open to the other unions. The syndicate has for example been offering its members the opportunity to buy plots of reclaimed land in Wādī al-Naṭrūn in the Buḥayra governorate. This land was also advertised in the village in Kafr al-Šayḵ in a recruitment campaign. However, allegations of corruption between the GSF's leader, businessmen and the government agency responsible for the land in Wādī al-Naṭrūn have been recurring.²⁶⁵ Hāšim Faraj, the president of the USFS, claimed that both the agency and the Ministry of Agriculture had appeared to be favouring the GSF, as other farmers' associations had been prevented from attending the previous auctions.²⁶⁶ As a consequence of the allegations, the responsible government agency was forced to cancel an auction for more land in September 2013, after an investigation into these auctions had begun. Whether or not corrupt, the ability of the GSF to offer its members this land is clearly a result of the close links with the agricultural establishment.

The alliance of the GSF with the old agricultural establishment is also evident in its political trajectory vis-à-vis the political event in post-25th of January Egypt. Whereas the GSEF enjoyed preferential position under the Mursī-government, the GSF emerged in this role after the coup d'état of the 3rd of July. Under the Mursī administration 'Abd al-Raḥman

²⁶² Interview, Kafr al-Šayḵ, 26.10.2012; 29.10.2012

²⁶³ Interview, Cairo, 13.11.2012

²⁶⁴ Interview, Kafr al-Šayḵ, 30.11.2012

²⁶⁵ *Al-Ahram*, "'niqābat al-fallāḥīn' taṣṭub al-fallāḥīn," 3. March 2013.

²⁶⁶ Muṣṭafā 'Āšūr, "'Ilghā' mazād 'arḍ "wādī al-Naṭrūn" ba'd šakāwī fallāḥīn.. wa-jihāt riqābīya tatawallī al-taḥqīq," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 19. September 2013.

Šukrī was the preferred farmers' union leader. He was for instance the one called upon to represent the farmers' view in a committee of top government officials tasked with solving the agricultural problems.²⁶⁷ After the 3rd of July coup, the GSF took over this role with the interim cabinet under then president 'Adlī Maṣṣūr. Former leader Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir was for example appointment as the farmer representative to the fifty-member constitutional review committee. This preferential access comes at the cost of the independence of these movements. During Mursī's presidency, the GSEF's chairman 'Abd al-Rahman Šukrī defended a negligible increase in official government prices for sugar cane, which he justified with "a promise" of better prices to come.²⁶⁸

The loss of political independence is still clearest in the role of these organisations in the political game. Acting as the nominal representatives of their sectors, they express support or opposition to different political initiatives. One illustrative case is the presidential decree that former president Mursī announced on the 22nd of November 2012, where he claimed immunity from judicial oversight for a limited period. The decree was very controversial at the time and contributed to a resurgence of demonstrations and protests. The GSEF supported the decree, while the GSF condemned it.²⁶⁹ Lately, the new chairman of the GSF Usāma al-Jaḥaš has been a vocal supporter of the presidential bid of General 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī. Before Sīsī announced his candidacy publicly, the GSF's deputy threatened to mobilise the farmers to protest lest the general run for office.²⁷⁰ In return, the GSF under his leadership was allowed to make suggestions for the agricultural part of the election program.²⁷¹

Thus while the close links to established networks have opened opportunities for influence at different times for the GSF and the GSEF and in particular their leaderships, these links have also tied them to the power they have come to rely on. This way of dealing with organised interest groups dates to the Free Officers' regime. In the fifties and sixties, trade unions and labour syndicates were incorporated into the state apparatus. This offered the workers' (and farmers') movements increased access to government, higher wages and

²⁶⁷ Muḥammad al- Tihāmī to Ikḥwān Kafr al-Šayḳ, undated, http://www.kfrelshikh.com/news_Details.aspx?Kind=1&News_ID=14842.

²⁶⁸ Saḥar al- Maḥjī, "Naqīb al-fallāḥīn: ziyādat as'ār tawrīd 'al-qašb' ḡayr murḍīya," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 10. January 2013.

²⁶⁹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayḳ, 30.11.2012; 1.12.2012; see also Muṣṭafā 'Āšūr, "Niqābāt al-fallāḥīn tanqasim bayna ta'yīd wa-rafd al-'i'lān al-dustūrī," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 27. November 2012.

²⁷⁰ Mutawallī Sālim, "Nā'ib naqīb al-fallāḥīn: sana'tašimu amām 'al-difā" al-usbū'a al-muqbil idā lam yatarasṣaḥ al-Sīsī," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 24. March 2014.

²⁷¹ Mutawallī Sālim, "'Al-Fallāḥīn' ta'uddu muqtaraḥāt li-taḍmīniḥā al-barnāmij al-intikābī li-'al-sīsī," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 23. March 2014.

better social benefits, but at the cost of their independence. Over time they became institutions of the regime rather than representatives of the popular movements. Both the GSF and the GSEF, because of their close links to other political forces, seem to be susceptible to such influence; they become the government's representatives to the farmers rather than the farmers' representatives to government.

Underlying the system of the Free Officers is a corporatist thinking wherein society is viewed as consisting of different sectors, for example agriculture. Furthermore, it is assumed that all the members of each sector – in this case, farmers – have the same interests, which implies that there is only one representative needed. Hence the Free Officers' enacted legislation, which limited syndicates and trade unions to one for each sector or profession. On the other hand, membership in these syndicates is compulsory for all workers in the respective professions.

Thus, according to the logic of corporatism there can be only one "true representative" for each sector. That creates competition between different organisations in each sector in order to be that one representative. This competition explains the lack of cooperation between the syndicates even though their goals are similar on paper. In the agricultural sector, the competition also extends to the agricultural cooperative union– the modern day equivalent to CACU. The former leader of the GSF is thus reported to have said the following about the leader of the cooperative union, after a heated debate in a meeting in the office of the minister of agriculture: "I will show him who the leader of the farmers is."²⁷² This was a response to the cooperative union's leader who had claimed to be the only legitimate representative of the farmers. These fights make sense only in the context of corporatism. Similar considerations are needed to understand the reasons why the minister of agriculture, Ayman Farīd Abū Ḥadīd, is airing the idea that the different unions should be merged together by law.²⁷³ Notwithstanding the lack of cooperation, it will be a blow to the independent organisations that has been growing since the uprising.

4.6 Rural revolutionaries: politicisation from below

The competition for influence at the centre affects the base of these syndicates. The organisations that are the closest to power also seem the farthest from the countryside. In a

²⁷² Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir quoted in Kālid Amīn, "Naqīb al-fallāḥīn yuhaddid bi-hall al-ittihād al-ta'āwunī dākil maktab al-wazīr, wa yu'lin tawallī Muḥammad 'Abd al-Halīm ra'īsan li-qitā' al-istiṣlāḥ," *'Ālim al-Zirā'a*, 6. August 2013.

²⁷³ Mutawallī Sālim and Muṣṭafā 'Āšūr, "Wazīr al-zirā'a yan'ī wafāt naqīb al-fallāḥīn," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 23. September 2013.

competition to be the “true representative”, long membership lists become more important than the individual member’s participation, especially if, as it seems with respect to the GSF and the GSEF, that the mobilisation of the farmers is secondary to the politics of their organisations. The prioritisation at the top levels of the organisations translates to neglect of the members that constitute its foundation. The old farmer in the village, for example, said he had heard nothing from the syndicate after they recruited him.²⁷⁴ By demobilising the members in this way, the power of the organisation itself dwindles. Members become dissatisfied with the syndicate. The farmer said that he was disappointed, and he that thought the membership fee was wasted money. He would not renew his membership.²⁷⁵ The erosion of the membership base further increases the dependence of these syndicates on their political patrons, and thus they further lose their ability to act independently.

In the Kafr al-Šayk village, there was a third attempt at unionisation – among the fishermen. Opposite the experience of the farmers, the fishermen had chosen to organise their own syndicate. They chose to keep it independent in order to retain its ties with the fishermen there, and to be a legitimate expression of their concerns. They did cooperate with another syndicate for fishermen based in Burj al-Burullus. The syndicate in Burj al-Burullus also provided some technical assistance during the process of registration, which remained bureaucratic and difficult, despite Bura‘ī’s declaration. The role of the Burj al-Burullus syndicate was foundational for the village union. The inspiration to start the village syndicate came from the one in Burj al-Burullus after the village fishermen were invited to its opening. The leader in Burj al-Burullus had in turn sought to start a trade union for the fishermen after meeting and talking to long-time labour activist Kālīd ‘Alī at al-Taḥrīr Square during the 25th of January protests.²⁷⁶ The dissemination effort here differs from the organised attempt at organisation, which for example the GSF and the GSEF and even the USF typify. The village syndicate organises the post-uprising politicisation of the fishermen for their own purposes. The trade union grew out of the fishermen’s need to act, and the realisation that existing institutions were incapable of answering their needs.

It was a continuation of a preceding politicisation. Some of the founding members had engaged politically during and after the ousting of Mubarak. For example they participated in a sit-in at the local mayor’s office. These members have made efforts to engage with existing institutions as well. For example they initiated a call for, and succeeded

²⁷⁴ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

²⁷⁵ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

²⁷⁶ Interview, Burj al-Burullus, 27.10.2012; Kafr al-Šayk, 28.10.2012

in organising elections in the fishermen's society – comparable to the cooperative societies of the farmers. They told me that the society had not had competitive elections for years. Usually, only seven fishermen had been nominated, making elections superfluous for the seven seats on the board, which had become monopolised by the sitting members. After the 25th of January uprising, they sought to take control over the board, forcing a general assembly where they nominated competing candidates for all the seats. The general assembly ended in a verbal quarrel, and the election was postponed for a year.²⁷⁷

The people who initiated these events had not previously participated in the organised politics of the Mubarak-regime. The trade union is an extension of this political engagement. One of the leaders told me: “Before there was no awareness, but now awareness is spreading.”²⁷⁸ To the leaders and the other members, establishing and joining the local syndicate is a conscious choice and a continuation of their struggle in the village after the uprising. However, the politicisation has roots that precede the uprising. The fishermen that are forming the union were some of the same that were active in the protest against the land reclamation project in the area in 1998. The case of the fishermen is similar to that of the USFS – and partly the UEF – where the organisation into trade unions and syndicates sustain a politicisation that preceded the uprising. Organising trade unions is also a manifestation of the will to mobilise beyond the immediate circles that took initiative. In the case of the fishermen, their active recruitment, whereby the trade union grew from 147 to 169 members in less than a week.²⁷⁹ In the case of the USFS, it is done with the help and assistance of an established network. The novelty is the ability and opportunity to organise without the state apparatus preventing it.

The problem of these unions, both the fishermen's and the USFS, is to break out of their established networks. The fishermen had taken a conscious decision to retain the syndicate on village level rather than to organise it as a branch under the larger union in Burj al-Burullus in order to keep the control of the syndicate.²⁸⁰ Estimating that around 4000 in the village were fishermen for a living, he said around 500 had authorisation to fish in the lake, meaning their identity cards stated they were fishermen. In late October, they had 167 members, and it was still increasing. However, incidents like the one involving the fishermen's society suggests that there internal conflicts. The USFS faced problems when it attempted to go beyond the LCHR's network of farmers. One of the informants from the

²⁷⁷ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 29.11.2012; 1.12.2012

²⁷⁸ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

²⁷⁹ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012; 28.10.2012

²⁸⁰ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

centre had also tried to establish a syndicate branch in his native village in Qalyūbīya, but without success. Speculating about the possible reasons for failures, he mentioned the suspicions of farmers: “because unions are something new, they [the farmers] don’t understand why they should become members. They might think it is just another organisation that will take money without doing something because they don’t see any immediate improvements.”²⁸¹ This is precisely what the middle-aged farmer in Kafr al-Šayk gave as his reason. The performance of some of the other farmers’ unions that emerged after the uprising justifies the suspicious nature of those farmers.

4.7 Dialectics of protest: Post-uprising political mobilisation

The novelty of the post-uprising politics in the countryside was the ability and will to organise independently. Despite the apparent political openness – the re-emergence of the street as a venue for politics – the most common associational form was that of labour syndicates. The conflicts that the syndicates represented locally had roots in the near past. As such, the most successful politicised unions were those that built on protests that preceded the uprising – they were a continuation in a different form. Simultaneously, not all conflicts became “unionised.” Instances of farmers organising spontaneously to retake land from which they have been dispossessed, or organising protests and roadblocks, occurred in parallel to the dissemination of trade unions. There were also rural conflicts of related but different kinds, like the village of Taḥsīn, which did not fit into the framework of the union. Nevertheless, the villagers were able to escalate the protests after the uprising. And conversely, not all instances of the spread of trade unions were based on preceding conflicts. Some were instead allied to different political forces, and thus they came to partly reflect the political ambitions of these forces.

The rural protests have a common characteristic, which is their avoidance of overly political forms of organisations. Political forces, with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime-NDP, struggled to organise and mobilise the countryside. Part of the appeal of labour unions as a form of organisation in the countryside was its “apolitical” nature. The fishermen for example stressed that they did not want “a political syndicate, but a service-syndicate” to defend the interests of the members.²⁸² However, they did not oppose to engage politically with state institutions. Rather it was a reference to the “politics” of parties, parliaments and patronage.

²⁸¹ Interview, Qalyūbīya, 2.12.2012

²⁸² Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 24.10.2012

The active avoidance of organising “politically” is a function of hegemony. Labour unions do not challenge hegemony in the same way as a political party does. There is a history of state involvement and surveillance tied to organisations that sought to mobilise the rural population or farmers, like the ASU or the cooperatives respectively. This history can be an important reason for caution and scepticism among the rural population towards organisations generally, and political organisations specifically. Memories of such organisations can be an important reason why farmers were hesitant to join organisations. It can also be such misgivings that are expressed by the middle-aged farmer that did not believe the syndicates would be able to change anything.

Hegemony manifests in other obstacles for the political mobilisation of the countryside. What appears as a purely practical limitation, the lack of experience in managing organisations and syndicates, is the consequence of the state apparatus’ ability to prevent farmers and fishermen from organising. There was never a stable organisation through which the farmers could gain experience in directing their political aspirations. The UEF’s founders sought to establish the union already in 1983 as a rural arm of the then legal Tajammu‘ party. State security prevented it from being a legal organisation and to actively mobilise farmers in the countryside. The LCHR represented another form of organisation as a network, but inherent with its own limitations. Operating as a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the LCHR lacked the ability to mobilise masses, unlike what trade unions are able. So although the centre’s network was useful for collecting information, the centre was unable to coordinate or mobilise proactively. And in the transition from NGO-based network to trade union, the leaders of the LCHR and the USFS face critical problems.

Another such practical difficulty that exacerbates the difficulties of mobilising farmers and fishermen and building organisational capacity is the demand that the unions can only organise those who are officially recognised in that profession. On every identity card the authorities have written a profession, and only those that the government recognises as “farmer” or “fisherman” have the right to join a union. Thus one of the most politically active farmers in the Kafr al-Šayk village could not become a syndicate member because he also worked as a teacher. Ownership to the land was still registered to his father, but the yields were not sufficient to sustain the extended family. This measure decreases the membership potential of the trade unions because many of those who work on the land either as day labourers or extended families are prevented from organising. The effect is hegemonic because it diminishes the potential of the syndicates.

Those that have organised the most widely – that is, they are present in the most governorates – are the syndicates that were able to draw on established political networks like the old agricultural establishment or the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁸³ This in turn means that the organisations are often subsumed under political aspirations that are not the farmers' or fishermen's own. The GSEF expressed the political exigencies of the Muslim Brotherhood, while the GSF to a large extent answered to the interests of the old regime remnants, and relied on the networks of parts of the old rural order. It has become the synthesis of dialectics of protest. In the first instance an aggressive project of dispossession through interested political forces created an antithesis in the form of localised, ad-hoc and reactive protests. As these protests changed after the revolution as the organisational form of trade unions spread, the political groups sought to control the direction of the rural political mobilisation through co-opting or establishing competing organisations. Thus they form a part of the hegemonic project rather than oppose hegemony.

“What did the revolution do?” A farmer asked the question rhetorically after I asked him about the impact of the 25th of January uprising. “Nothing has changed,” he continued.²⁸⁴ The dissemination of trade unions appears a novelty only on a superfluous level. They are built on pre-existing networks of domination, or they representing old conflicts and struggle to go beyond the confines of these conflicts. However, as attempts to organise the rural conflicts, they have the potential to move beyond these confines and in the longer term become a meaningful expression of the political aspirations of people in rural Egypt.

²⁸³ Nawar and Abdel-Hakim, "Current Status and Prospective of Farmers' Unions and Syndicates in Egypt," p. 19.

²⁸⁴ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 1.12.2012

5 Elections, mobilisation, politics

The presidents left, the regimes are still here.
Marina Ottaway, 2011²⁸⁵

Farmers have always been under the heel and they are still under the heel.
Farmer, 26.10.2012, Kafr al-Šayk

It is a paradox that the rural poor, who are the least able to voice their concerns and influence policy outcomes, are nevertheless consistently accused of determining the electoral outcomes in Egypt. Hani Shukrallah for instance pits the revolutionary cities against the counterrevolutionary countryside that thwarts the revolutionaries through winning election after election:

Not only has the Egyptian Revolution been an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon (with the countryside basically standing on the sidelines). But as one ballot after another since the Constitutional Declaration of March 2011 and up to last December's referendum have shown, the countryside has acted as a bulwark, or strategic reserve for the counter-revolution [...].²⁸⁶

According to Shukrallah, the revolutionary forces are consistently outdone at the polls because of the rural voters, like sheep, all follow the counterrevolutionary forces of either the old regime or the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus he continues:

Egypt in 2012/3 is a largely urban society [...]. The fact that this is yet to express itself in the ballot box is a function of a number of factors, including big pro-democracy majorities in the cities as opposed to overwhelming pro-authoritarian majorities in the countryside; the bussing or rather half-trucking of rural voters – en masse – to the voting stations [...].²⁸⁷

And although Shukrallah is only one commentator, he expresses a common prejudice. The same sort of argument, although in different terms, was made in the commentary on the 2014 presidential elections to explain the victory and the voter turnout. The rural voters are cited as the reason for 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī's high support; in absolute terms he won more than 23 million votes:

According to Mohamed Fahmy Menza, a professor of political science at the American University of Cairo, Sisi's sweeping victory over his opponent, Hamdeen Sabahi, in the provinces was secured through the coordinated efforts of rural leaders mobilizing local communities to vote in his favor.²⁸⁸

The methods used by NDP to mobilise the rural population to participate have been well documented. In Upper Egypt, the party relied on tribes and clans.²⁸⁹ In the Delta, the

²⁸⁵ Marina Ottaway, "The Presidents Left, the Regimes are Still Here," Carnegie Middle East Program, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/02/14/presidents-left-regimes-are-still-here/3t0a>.

²⁸⁶ Hani Shukrallah, "Cairo: the city vanquished? The Muslim Brotherhood and the ruralisation of Egypt," *Ahram Online* 2012, 31. December.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Safa Joudeh to Al Monitor, 2014, 30. May, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/egypt-fayoum-tribes-sisi-elections-president.html>.

²⁸⁹ Hans Christian Korsholm Nielsen, "Tribal Identity and Politics in Aswan Governorate," in *Upper Egypt:*

rural bourgeoisie fulfilled a similar role.²⁹⁰ Other strategies such as vote buying were also reported. For example, Ninette Fahmy interviewed a farmer who had voted in the 1990 elections: “I just put a mark on a piece of paper. It only took me one second and I earned a 10£E [Egyptian pounds] note. Not bad at all.”²⁹¹ Other times, coercion was used to force voters. Fahmy continues about a group of villagers that decided to boycott the election, but were arrested and not released until they had voted for the NDP.²⁹² Given the corrupt methods used to mobilise voters, it is possible to ask about the *raison d’être* of elections in an authoritarian state. Lisa Blaydes argues that elections were an important method for distributing scarce resources.²⁹³ Thus it might be expected that voter mobilisation in the rural areas drop as the elections lost their distributive functions after the uprising.

5.1 From voice to vote: rural electoral mobilisation

The presidential election in 2012 was divided into two rounds. The first fielded an open round of several candidates, and the two candidates with the highest shares of votes went on to a run-off round. The votes were counted with the country as one district, meaning that one vote counted the same in all the districts.²⁹⁴ I chose this election due to the opportunities for comparison offered by the two rounds. Additionally the ties between different candidates and political forces meaning it is easier to recognise ideological preferences across the voting pattern than in the constitutional referenda.

In the first round the top five governorates in terms of percent of voters that participated can be classified as urban. They were, in order of highest percentage of turnout (turnout percentage in parenthesis): Port Said (60,1), Alexandria (55,6), Cairo (55,6), Suez (55,1), and Damietta (53,5). Then followed the ostensibly rural provinces of Minūfiya (52,0) and Qalyūbiya (51,8), before the two other urban governorates of Giza (51,1) and Ismā‘īliya (50,7) rounded off the top ten.²⁹⁵ These were also the governorates that achieved a voter turnout above 50 percent, while Port Said was the only (and just barely) above 60 percent. This seems to contradict the above – that rural voters are the most active.

Identity And Change, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins and Reem Saad (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2004).

²⁹⁰ Rouchdy, "Batra."

²⁹¹ Fahmy, *The politics of Egypt : state-society relationship*: p. 230.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Lisa Blaydes, *Elections and distributive politics in Mubarak's Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²⁹⁴ All election numbers in the following, unless stated otherwise, are from the official pages of the Presidential Election Commission, "Al-Mawqi' al-rasmī li-l-intikābāt al-ri'āsīya 2012," (elections.eg2012).

²⁹⁵ Egyptian registered voters abroad had a higher turnout than Damietta, but I exclude this vote in the analysis.

When compared to the second round of the 2012 presidential elections, the picture changes. Then the top ten governorates in terms of voter turnout were Minūfīya (61,6); Port Said (58,1); Qalyūbīya (58,0); Šarqīya (56,6); Suez (56,0); Damietta (55,9); Banī Suwayf (55,9); Ġarbīya (55,8); Ismā‘īlīya (55,5); and Cairo (54,8). The difference is clear with the rural provinces of Minūfīya, Qalyūbīya, and Šarqīya filling three of the highest posts. By the second round of the election, rural voters were again dominating the ballot. Ġarbīya is a special case, consisting both of large rural parts yet including the two cities of Tanṭā and Al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā, which makes it difficult to determine at the provincial level. The final noticeable feature is the high turnout in Banī Suwayf, the only “southern” province in the top ten.

Another interesting aspect that can illustrate the urban–rural divide between the two rounds of the election is the increases in turnout in some governorates. The trend was particularly noticeable in precisely several of the rural districts in Middle and Upper Egypt, from Fayyūm to Aswan. The single highest increase in the turnout percentage occurred in Minyā. In the first round 37,8 % of registered voters had participated while in the second round 51,8 did the same – a difference of 14 percentage points. The surrounding districts of Banī Suwayf, Sūhāj, and Asyūt all saw more than 10 percentage points increases while turnout in Fayyūm grew by 9,4 percentage points. The only governorates to rival these surges in turnout were Minūfīya and Luxor, which makes the former something of a special case within the Delta.

These election data reveal not only that rural voters were mobilised for the final round of the elections, but they also suggest who mobilised them. In the previous chapter, I noted the limited spread of political parties in the countryside compared to the spread of trade unions as forms of organisation and mobilisation to gain a voice. However, the election result shows that electoral mobilisation – the act of voting – is more prevalent in the countryside than in the cities. The second feature is that whereas voter turnout in the cities was stable or slightly decreasing from the first to the second round, some rural governorates saw significant leaps in the turnout percentage. This suggests that the two candidates that competed in the second round run-off both were able to mobilise the countryside, rather than the cities, for the additional support.

The two candidates were Muḥammad Mursī of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Aḥmad Šafīq, who was widely perceived as the state and old regime’s candidates. The make-up of the race thus suggests that the Brotherhood and the old state party, the NDP – even though it was officially dissolved – relied on and were able to garner their votes primarily in the

countryside. This seems to support Shukrallah's thesis, that the voters in the countryside determines the election outcomes. However, this argument underestimates the absolute numbers of voters in the cities. Had the turnouts been higher in the large cities, it would easily have made up for the extra votes the two campaigns gathered in the countryside. For example, one percent higher turnout in Cairo is in absolute terms twice that of Buḥayra or more than four times the votes of one percent in Fayyūm. Hence, the clearest aspect that emerges from the election statistics is that both the Muslim Brotherhood and the campaign of Aḥmad Šafīq looked to the countryside rather than the cities to mobilise the extra voters for the run-off round. That the campaigns sought support in the countryside lends credence to the suggestion that established networks like tribes and clans are able to mobilise and "deliver" voters there. The specificity of the governorates that supported the respective candidates further reveals the characteristics of these networks.

The campaign of Aḥmad Šafīq had its clearest victory in the governorate of Minūfiya. He won 71,5 percent of the votes in the governorate, and more than 60 percent of the votes in every district (*markaz*) except one. Minūfiya was also remarkable for the leap in voter turnout; it was the only governorate in the Delta growth where the turnout came close to 10 percentage points. It also had the highest overall turnout of the governorates, 61,5 percent. Aḥmad Šafīq won the governorate in the first round as well, when he got 53,5 percent of the votes. In absolute numbers his increase from the first to the second round was more than votes for all first round candidates put together except Muḥammad Mursī. Mursī's share of votes also increased in absolute numbers from the first to the second round, though less than Šafīq's share. If it is assumed, however, that the first round votes of the other Islamist contender, 'Abd al-Mun'im Abū al-Futūḥ, are added to Mursī's second round tally, that would account for almost 90 percent of Mursī's "new" votes in the second round. In that case, the electoral mobilisation managed by the Šafīq campaign was considerable, and they were able to draw on established networks for electoral mobilisation friendly to the state apparatus.

The number indicates that the rural bourgeoisie on which Aḥmad Šafīq's campaign relied to mobilise voters, has an especially strong position in Minūfiya. Furthermore, Minūfiya is the governorate in the Delta that had the fewest registered protests in 2012.²⁹⁶ Together they are an indication of a nexus between electoral mobilisation, political quiescence, and the domination of the rural bourgeoisie in the lower Delta. The forces that

²⁹⁶ Mīrḡanī et al., "Al-Iḥtijājāt al-'Ummālīya fī Miṣr 2012," p. 66.

mobilise rural voters for the elections are the same as those that contribute to the political demobilisation. Malak Rouchdy, for example, describes these mechanisms in the village of Batra. There the social and economic domination of the rural upper class secured the political leadership of the prominent families. These families were able to “promise” the votes of the village in return for political concessions from the state.²⁹⁷ Batra is an example of how social and economic power translates into political domination.

Another province with a relatively low frequency of protest is Qalyūbīya. The governorate had the second lowest number of protests of the rural Delta governorates.²⁹⁸ It also resembles the neighbouring Minūfīya in terms of the electoral trajectory. Šafīq won the governorate in the second round after receiving the most votes in the first. It also saw a 6,2 percentage point increase in turnout. The similarities are even bigger in the districts bordering Qalyūbīya where Šafīq won with similar votes, over 60 percent of the votes. One of my informants in Qalyūbīya stressed precisely the problems the village faced with the descendants of a large landowning family that dominated the local administration and the governorate administration.²⁹⁹ This was the same village where they had attempted to establish a trade union, but had failed to recruit members. Thus, when I asked how they defended their interests as farmers, the answer was that they use middlemen (*wāṣṭa*).³⁰⁰ Thus the informant describes how the political economy of patronage permeates the local community. At the same time, it prevents the establishment of organisations independently of networks, and yet it is able to thoroughly mobilise the community for elections.

5.2 *The Islamist vote*

Disaggregated to district level the election results in the two governorates show another pattern of electoral mobilisation. As Eric Schewe uncovers, Šafīq dominated the “older” agricultural parts of the governorates close to the Nile.³⁰¹ The Islamists dominated in the desert border districts in the Delta, such as the Sādāt district. This is the only part of Minūfīya that is located west of the Nile, in areas of what formed the Taḥrīr province in the 1950s and 1960s. The Taḥrīr province stretched from Cairo to Alexandria, and incorporated all the areas

²⁹⁷ Rouchdy, “Batra,” p. 243.

²⁹⁸ Damietta had fewer registered protests, but it is commonly considered an urban governorate.

²⁹⁹ Interview, Qalyūbīya, 2.12.2012; the informant had voted for Mursī on the grounds that Šafīq was the candidate of the old regime, the state, and the military. He had also convinced his friends and family to vote for Mursī. By December 2012 – during the accelerating protests after the “constitutional declaration” he said he regretted his choice, and was vocally opposed to then President Mursī.

³⁰⁰ Interview, Qalyūbīya, 2.12.2012

³⁰¹ Eric Schewe to Eric Schewe, 2012, 7. July, <http://ericschewe.wordpress.com/2012/07/07/district-map-of-the-presidential-election-in-lower-egypt-an-environmental-history/>.

subject to the land reclamation projects of the Free Officers' regime. The same pattern emerges at the district level in Qalyūbiya. The further away from the "old" lands, the more Mursī replaces Šafīq as the preferred candidate of the voters. Looking at Buḥayra, a province that like the Sādāt district consists of areas of reclaimed lands of the Taḥrīr province, the pattern is the same. The further away from the Nile's Rosetta branch and into reclaimed lands, the larger the domination of the Islamist candidates. In five of the six districts located on the west bank of the Rosetta branch, Šafīq won more than 50 percent of the votes. The exception was the district of Rosetta on the coast. However, in the outlying districts, Mursī claimed more than 60 percent of the votes, some places winning with 70 or 80 percent.

Historically, the Taḥrīr province was subject to different developments than the rest of the Delta. Under Nasser and Sadat, the province was the testing ground for agricultural policies shifting from large public farms to privatised agribusiness.³⁰² The common thread was the general exception to the landownership ceilings. Much of the land was organised in large state farms. These state farms were later privatised and partly sold to landowners and agribusinesses under Sadat and partly divided by the agricultural workers at the disbanded state farms.³⁰³ However, beginning in 1987 under the aegis of the Mubarak project, reclaimed lands were increasingly given to the large cadres of educated unemployed. These graduates were after 1997 joined by some of the tenant farmers evicted due to the implementation of law 96.³⁰⁴

All the authors who have studied the new lands note the high degree of absenteeism among the graduates.³⁰⁵ Meyer estimates that only 40 percent of graduate beneficiaries were actively involved in the farming in one of the earliest projects, with 15 percent of the houses permanently occupied.³⁰⁶ Malm and Esmailian report similar figures in other recent projects.³⁰⁷ As Springborg has noted, the graduate scheme was used to reward government employees, which explains the high degree of absenteeism and the propensity of the

³⁰² Robert Springborg, "Patrimonialism and policy making in Egypt: Nasser and Sadat and the tenure policy for reclaimed lands," *Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1 (1979).

³⁰³ Ibid., pp. 66-7; see also Günter Meyer, "Economic Changes in the Newly Reclaimed Lands: From State Farms to Small Holdings and Private Agricultural Enterprises," in *Directions of Change in Rural Egypt*, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins and Kirsten Westergaard (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

³⁰⁴ Hanne Kirstine Adriansen, "Land reclamation in Egypt: a study of life in the new lands," *Geoforum* 40, no. 4 (2009): p. 666; Meyer, "Economic Changes in the Newly Reclaimed Lands: From State Farms to Small Holdings and Private Agricultural Enterprises," pp. 345-6.

³⁰⁵ Adriansen, "Land reclamation in Egypt: a study of life in the new lands," p. 671; Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailian, "Ways in and out of vulnerability to climate change: abandoning the Mubarak Project in the northern Nile Delta, Egypt," *Antipode* 45, no. 2 (2013): p. 481; Meyer, "Economic Changes in the Newly Reclaimed Lands: From State Farms to Small Holdings and Private Agricultural Enterprises," p. 345.

³⁰⁶ Meyer, "Economic Changes in the Newly Reclaimed Lands: From State Farms to Small Holdings and Private Agricultural Enterprises," p. 345.

³⁰⁷ Malm and Esmailian, "Doubly dispossessed by accumulation," p. 481.

graduates to sell or lease the land.³⁰⁸ And it is logical, as Meyer found, that the graduates that stayed on in the reclaimed lands were those with an agricultural degree or background.³⁰⁹

These new villages have a different social composition than the “old” lands do. As new villages they lack the old class of the landowners, the rural bourgeoisie. That means that the strategy of retraditionalisation unsuitable to dominate the political life in these lands. The domination of the Islamist vote in the new lands, in other words, illustrates the geographical and social limits of the retraditionalisation as a strategy for electoral mobilisation and control. Yet the shortcomings of the state’s preferred strategy for dealing with the countryside does not explain why the Islamists came to dominate in these areas.

The Muslim Brotherhood has historically been an urban movement, but Hossam Tammam argued that the movement has been undergoing a process of ruralisation since the late 1980s. He shows how their leadership at top and middle levels increasingly came from rural backgrounds, one prominent example being Muḥammad Mursī. He suggests that the growing appeal of the movement in the countryside reflects a traditionalisation of the movement’s ideology towards a stance that is acceptable to conservative, but not radical, rural voters. In universities, the Muslim Brotherhood attracts newcomers to the cities rather than original city dwellers.³¹⁰ Drawing on Meyer’s insight, that the graduates that stayed on in the new villages came from agricultural backgrounds, they are from a social background that Tammam suggests makes them likely recruits of the Muslim Brotherhood. These graduates can form networks that can be used to mobilise voters together with the dispossessed former tenant farmers. I noticed that some of the project villages along the coastal highway in Kafr al-Šayḵ were visibly in favour of Mursī. Large banners, flags, and posters in the villages illustrated the dominance of Muslim Brotherhood in these villages.

The ruralisation of the Muslim Brotherhood could also be an unintended result of an effort to build an electoral machine capable of competing with the NDP in the semi-open parliamentary elections in the last twenty years of Mubarak’s tenure.³¹¹ This manifested especially in the governorates of Fayyūm, Banī Suwayf, Minyā, Asyūt, and Sūhāj, the

³⁰⁸ Springborg, "Agrarian Bourgeoisie, Semiproletarians, and the Egyptian State: Lessons for Liberalization," p. 465; see also Malm and Esmailian, "Ways in and out of vulnerability to climate change: abandoning the Mubarak Project in the northern Nile Delta, Egypt," p. 484.

³⁰⁹ Meyer, "Economic Changes in the Newly Reclaimed Lands: From State Farms to Small Holdings and Private Agricultural Enterprises," p. 346.

³¹⁰ Hossam Tammam, "MB goes rural," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 919, 23. October 2008.

³¹¹ Sameh Naguib, "The Muslim Brotherhood: Contradictions and Transformations," in *Political and Social Protest in Egypt*, ed. Nicholas S. Hopkins, *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 29:2/3 (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 2009), p. 166.

stronghold of Egyptian Islamism.³¹² The Islamist forces dominated the elections there. In the first round, Abū al-Futūḥ and Mursī both did well with Abū al-Futūḥ placing second in front of Šafīq – and behind Mursī – in Fayyūm and Banī Suwayf. In the second round, the Islamist dominance translated into wins where Mursī generally received well over 60 percent of the votes. On the district level, the results show the discrepancy between the towns where Šafīq did comparatively well, getting more than or close to 50 percent, and the countryside, where the Islamists predominated. Mursī regularly got more than 70 percent of the votes there.³¹³

The Islamic movements were able to rely on similar tactics as the Šafīq campaign did in the core of the Delta. In that regard it is noteworthy that the turnout was generally higher in the provincial towns where Šafīq's campaign, judging by the results, was more competitive. This seems counterintuitive. Looking more closely at voter mobilisation, however, the increase in turnout is far larger in the rural voting districts from the first to the second round. In Minyā governorate, which had the highest overall leap in voter turnout, the increases vary from 12 to 18 percentage points. Simultaneously, both campaigns had networks in the towns and were able to mobilise supporters there, which explains the higher turnout. These results show that the Muslim Brotherhood has succeeded in building the capacity to mobilise large numbers of rural voters.

The Muslim Brotherhood drew their support from other rural areas as well, notably the North Western coast, but also the Delta. In Ġarbīya several rural areas as well as the industrial cities voted in favour of Šafīq. The Islamist current struggled there in the first round as well, with Šafīq getting large percentages in especially the southern rural districts bordering Minūfiya, while Šabāḥī won al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā. In the other rural Delta governorates – Šarqīya, Daqahlīya, and Qalyūbiya – Mursī got between 40 and 45 percent of the votes.

The ruralisation of the Brotherhood reappears in the voting patters as the ability to mobilise rural voters, which in some areas was impressive. The difference in voter turnout between the first and second rounds of the 2012 presidential elections confirms the assumption of the rural electoral mobilisation. This is despite the fact that city governorates

³¹² Further south the results evens out with Mursī and Šafīq competing more evenly. In the southernmost parts, there is a history of clans and tribes being used to mobilise voters for the ruling party – or rather competing candidates of the NDP. The tribes was thus turned into a vertical structure that gained access to resources patronage in return for mobilising the most voters – but not politicise them. Nielsen, "Tribal Identity," pp. 225-30.

³¹³ Between the five different governorates mentioned, there were 45 rural voting (*markaz*) and 14 urban (*qism*) districts. Of the 45 rural districts, Mursī won more than 70 percent of the vote in 16 of these districts. He also won more than 60 percent in 20 others. The lowest margin was 55 percent in favour of Mursī. Mursī received more than 60 percent in two out of fourteen urban districts, while Šafīq won more than 50 percent in 7.

had higher voter turnouts on average than did the rural, and that voter turnout in the cities matter more than most of the rural provinces. However, the key mobilisation efforts by both the Mursī and the Šafīq campaigns were in rural areas.

5.3 *Mursī's farmers*

The Muslim Brotherhood effectively mobilised rural voters for the presidential election. The question is whether these voters had any influence on the policies of Muḥammad Mursī's presidency. Mursī addressed the situation of farmers once during his brief tenure. The occasion was the 9th of September 2012, the date when Egypt celebrates *'īd al-fallāḥ*, the day of the farmers, to commemorate the signing of the first agrarian reform law by the Free Officers.

Mursī announced two initiatives from the state to improve the situation of farmers on the sixtieth anniversary of the land reforms. First, farmers who owed money to the PBDAC would have them cancelled when the debts were less than 10 000 pounds. Second, Mursī announced that the state's official price of rice would increase roughly ten percent, from around 1800, which was current market prices, to 2000 pounds a ton. The state would also forgive fines imposed on farmers for growing rice in excess of the quotas. Although both were positive measures on paper, they were limited.

The debt cancellations of PBDAC loans for example estimated to benefit around 44,000 farmers. However, the PBDAC is a part of a structure of patronage. Therefore farmers with these loans are those with access through connections and networks. A significant portion of the loans was also non-performing, which is expected when the system is managed according to patronage logic. Thus debt erasure would not benefit the broad mass of rural poor, but a few, presumably farmers with some influence and financial capacity. Regardless, one informant doubted that they would be able to implement the measure because of the financial restraints on government spending.³¹⁴ Equally important is the existence of vested interests within the bank that would work to stop such measures.

The story of the Egyptian rice market is another instance of market failure in Egyptian agriculture. According to Timothy Mitchell, after the government had removed the restrictions on rice-growing, like area limitations and delivery quotas, by 1992, farmers grew so much that the government was forced to re-impose the quotas and issue fines for

³¹⁴ Interview, Daqahlīya, 20.11.2012

transgressions in order to save water.³¹⁵ Nevertheless in 1996 the farmers grew rice in an area of 1,2 million acres, 300,000 more than stipulated by official regulations. By 2011 this number had increased even more, and rice was grown “illegally” on 500,000 acres.³¹⁶

The internal fluctuations in the Egyptian domestic market are significant. As late as in 2011 the rice price was reported to reach new highs as domestic demand had surged ahead of Ramadan.³¹⁷ The increase in “illegal” rice cultivation comes despite fluctuations in price of rice. This is similar to the increases after the reforms, which happened in the face of decreasing prices. In other words, the increases in rice production contradict the market’s logic. The consistent level of “illegal” production suggests that rice is grown primarily for household consumption rather than the market given that rice is the staple food in the northern Delta. This in turn would explain the annual shortfalls of rice during the summer.

The price increase Mursī announced was in response to the low prices of rice at the time. Just after the harvest season, the price of rice had dropped to around 1800 pounds per ton. This reflects the increasing demand during harvest season because Egypt produces more rice than it consumes. Excess rice is not exported because of a government imposed export ban in place since 2008, which leads prices to fall during harvest as supply increases. Mursī attempted to respond to the falling prices and to adjust the market by effectively setting a price floor – returning to the policies of the early 1990s. The price Mursī referred to, however, was not an official market price, but the price of the buying tenders of the ministry of supply for the subsidy program that the government runs. About a quarter of the rice consumed yearly is distributed through the government’s food subsidy program, with more than sixty million Egyptians receiving subsidised rice. The export ban in effect since March 2008, which caused the price fall, was originally a response to high prices in the spring.

Mursī’s policy failed to account for the complexity of the agricultural sector, and he was unable to address the underlying problem. Trying to raise the price of rice addresses the symptoms of market failure, but not its cause. The opposition was no better, however, criticising Mursī not for failing to solve the structural problems in the rice market, but because it increased the financial burden on the state. Mursī’s familiar approach to agriculture is illustrative of the limitations of the politics of Cairo in a situation where those who are the most affected of the state’s rural policies have the least to say. Mursī’s farmers –

³¹⁵ Mitchell, *Rule of experts : Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*: pp. 252, 364 n. 22.

³¹⁶ Mutawallī Sālim, "Muḳālafāt zirā'at al-'aruz tartafī'u ilā 500 'alf faddān.. wa-l-ḥukūma tubarrir bi-'al-inqilāb al-'amnī'," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 10. August 2011.

³¹⁷ Amīra Ṣāliḥ, "'As'ar al-'aruz tawāṣil al-irtifa'.. wa 400% ziyāda fī al-ṭalab," *Al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 28. July 2011. Similar increases were reported for the year before, see Mona El-Fiqi, "Rice prices skyrocket," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 1007, 15. July 2010.

the constituencies that his policies were supposed to benefit – were not landless rural labourers or small farmers, but richer farmers either able to benefit from access to loans in the PBDAC or producing rice for marketing rather than subsistence.

Mursī's failure illustrates that the disconnection between rural voters mobilised in the election and the policy outcomes also apply to the Muslim Brotherhood. Seeing the process of ruralisation in the context of the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood out of the universities into a populist movement, the pro-market discourse gave way to criticisms of the neoliberal policies that successive governments have pursued since the 1990s. Yet, as Sameh Naguib points out, the criticism of these reforms did not imply that the Brotherhood "abandoned" their free market convictions.³¹⁸ An important part of the movement was always linked to Sadat's economic policies and emerging free market in the 1970s and 1980s.³¹⁹

Not all blame for the failure is rightly placed at the feet of Mursī and the Muslim Brotherhood. Another reason for the policy outcome is the institutional inertia of the Egyptian state apparatus. As I argued above, there are vested interests both within and connected to the bureaucracy that promotes the continuation of neoliberal reforms. And the bureaucrats were the same as well. Mursī's first measure in the agricultural sector, to delete the debts, was a rehash of a measure announced by the then prime minister, Kamāl al-Janzūrī in mid-December 2011.³²⁰ This case supports the argument that the rural and agricultural policies are subject to the influence of interested social forces embedded in institutions and networks of market reforms that have taken shape since the 1980s. The Brotherhood's ideological shift in a neoliberal direction on economic matters at the time of uprising is indicative of its continuing links with these social forces of the market reforms.

5.4 Conclusion: Hegemony and rural political mobilisation

Electoral mobilisation was a part of hegemony in the countryside. The NDP had a strong grip on the countryside through local intermediaries such as tribes or the rural bourgeoisie. Voters were mobilised through these networks that span from the centre to the periphery prior to the uprising. Lisa Blaydes argues that elections were essential for the survival of the authoritarian regime in Egypt; through them scarce resources could be distributed to the key constituencies.³²¹ In other words, elections functioned to maintain the regime's position.

³¹⁸ Naguib, "The Muslim Brotherhood: Contradictions and Transformations," p. 167.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

³²⁰ Steven Viney, "Farmers in limbo after stalled promises of debt forgiveness," *Egypt Independent*, 26. January 2012.

³²¹ Blaydes, *Elections and distributive politics in Mubarak's Egypt*.

They became an institution of hegemony. The regime encouraged and regulated the practice of voting as part of this hegemony. Through voting in elections when the outcome is known beforehand, voters who participate confirm their acquiescence to the regime. Voting in fraudulent election structures people to behave *as if* the elections were honest. The 2014 presidential election is a case in point, where the Sīsī campaign openly declared its need for a high turnout. Without the usual mobilisation of voters, however, the election offices remained empty until the Presidential Election Commission took measures. Without a high turnout, the election would be meaningless because the regime would not be able to demonstrate popular acquiescence. Thus the election illustrates how voting can be an element of hegemony and provide an authoritarian government with legitimacy.

Elections do not have to be an institution of hegemony; they have a counter-hegemonic potential. After the uprising the government lost control over the outcome of elections as it lost the ability to forge results. Hence it also lost control over the voting practice. This opened for competitive elections that had the potential to mobilise voters for counter-hegemonic projects. The first round of the 2012 presidential election in Kafr al-Šayḵ is an example of this. The result was that Ḥamdīn Šabāḥī, one of the “revolutionary” candidates, emerged as a clear winner in a rural governorate. According to Samuli Schielke, the Šabāḥī campaign had succeeded in reactivating old leftist and Nasserist networks. In the village he cites as an example, that network had at first consisted of six Nasserist families, but as the campaign unfolded, many of the young “village revolutionaries” had joined.³²² And according to the election result, in the first round Šabāḥī took 62,1 percent of the votes, meaning that his campaign had successfully provided a non-hegemonic alternative at the time.

However, the 2012 contest was ultimately dominated by the two campaigns that most closely imitated the mobilising strategies of the NDP. The successful campaigns of Muḥammad Mursī and Aḥmad Šafīq showed how the networks between the state and the influential rural upper class continued to function after the uprising. The election result also illustrated the social and geographical limitations of these networks. This limitation of the respective networks explains the effort by both sides in the fight between the state interests and the Muslim Brotherhood to co-opt the farmers’ trade unions and through it direct the political mobilisation in the countryside.

³²² Samuli Schielke to “You’ll be late for the revolution”, 2012, 25. May, <http://samuliegypt.blogspot.no/2012/05/some-social-science-of-presidential.html>.

The rural networks that dominate the politics of the countryside bridge the economic, social, and political categories. The networks have their roots in the 1960s when extended family networks from the rural bourgeoisie over time came to dominate the state's rural institutions. This in turn abetted the power of these family networks and provided access to patronage resources. The resulting networks go beyond the imagined spaces of "state" and "market". Although this is symbolised in the emergences of persons like Yūsuf Wālī that embody both categories, it is also articulated in agricultural policies that corresponded to the class interests of rural bourgeoisie. Similarly the market reforms came at the detriment of small farmers, tenants, and the rural poor.

Hegemony in the Egyptian countryside is not limited to the instances of political mobilisation. Hegemony, I have argued, structures everyday actions through the force of the "silent compulsion of everyday relations". The removal of social security and support systems for the rural population through the market reforms or through the deterioration of the state's services has had the effect of reinforcing hegemony by accentuating the vulnerability of subaltern classes. My informants reported that the material situation had become increasingly difficult after the 25th of January uprising. Negative trends continued or increased. Informants reported that the costs grew, while the returns for selling the harvest decreased. As previously mentioned, one of the farmers summed it up like this: "The farmer has always been under the heel, and he is still under the heel."³²³ Similarly, on the lake the illegal expansion of the fish farms quickened, as did illegal fishing. One of the fishermen described the situation like this: "Before there was a corrupt police, now there is no police."³²⁴ Although the uprising successfully challenged (and defeated) the police on the streets in Cairo and toppled the president, the power holders in the countryside were left unchecked; the regime was still there.

The project of dispossession of land and lake that the market reforms entailed gave rise to protests and demonstrations by the rural population. The relationship between the dispossession projects and the rural protests was dialectical. At the beginning they mobilised locally and ad-hoc as an antithesis of the land reforms. After the uprising the form of political mobilisation changed from protests and demonstration to the organisation of trade unions and syndicates. However, as the political mobilisation converged into organised trade unions and syndicates, political forces emerged to control the farmers' movement and use it for political purposes: a synthesis. In the post-uprising political situation in particular two syndicates that

³²³ Interview, Kafr al-Šayk, 26.10.2012

³²⁴ Interview, Burj al-Burullus, 27.10.2012

emerged illustrate this tendency, the GSF and the GSEF. The former has built upon the network of rural bourgeoisie, state institutions like the PBDAC, the agricultural cooperatives, and the now disbanded NDP. The latter is tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. The two syndicates were thus connected to the same political forces that supported the Šafīq and Mursī campaigns. The success of these campaigns during the 2012 presidential election indicated the mobilising potential of these political forces as well as the networks on which they relied.

There are, for the time being, also examples of political mobilisation in the countryside that happen independently of the networks of power. There are local trade unions and electoral mobilisation efforts that are able to mobilise the rural population outside the networks of power described above. These efforts have until now not successfully established a lasting counter-hegemonic organisation. Efforts to mobilise against the hegemonic institutions are difficult as hegemony is tied to the everyday acts of survival. The most successful attempts are those trade unions and political networks that remain local seeking to avoid the networks of power. And if these organisations expand, there is a risk that they will be co-opted into the existing power structure and hence become another hegemonic institution. However, the existence of these efforts proves that there is space for counter-hegemonic actions and practices. The difficulty lies in finding alternative ways of mobilisation.

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